Primitivism, Transgression, and other Myths:  
The Philosophical Anthropology of Georges Bataille  

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Abstract: This essay reviews some of the anthropological theories and ethnographic interpretations offered to us by the 20th Century French writer and philosopher Georges Bataille. As a writer, Bataille is both the product of his own historical environment as well as the object of intense contemporary philosophical and literary reappropriation by others; at the same time, however, he is also a writer whose own original philosophy has helped shape the boundaries of these same disciplines. Accordingly, an introductory section sets this scene for Bataille’s ideas about societies both “primitive” and modern. At the beginning of his philosophical career, Bataille shifts from an interest in the cultural impurities of sacrificial or primitive behaviors to a more abstract philosophy of "the sacred" or "the primitive" as an element of all social life. As such Bataille has become an attractively transgressive writer for contemporary scholars. A second section examines the mythical quality of Bataille’s writings on prehistoric origins, arguing that his need for origin myths is shared by the anthropology with which Bataille was engaged. A third section looks more closely at examples from so-called primitive societies in Bataille’s work The Accursed Share, arguing that these examples fill a problematic gap in his theory between myth-like natural and cultural origins. A short concluding section finds that Bataille’s orientation has much in common with his contemporary anthropologists, but that Bataille's philosophy will mean that he must ultimately depart from an empirical examination of other societies.
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Part I: Situations and appropriations: Bataille’s primitivism

“Clearly, my project was too vast and the announcement of a vast project is always its betrayal. No one can say without being comical that he is getting ready to overturn things. He must simply overturn, and that is all.”

Reading these words almost sixty years after the publication of *The Accursed Share*, I am left wondering exactly what it is that Georges Bataille has overturned. Bataille’s *Accursed Share* sold about fifty copies in its first year of publication (Stoeckl 1991:2). Twenty years later, Michel Foucault would write in an introduction to Bataille’s collected works that the author “is now said to be one of the most important writers of this century” (1970: i) - important, I would agree, but in a very particular context. Perhaps Bataille gained popularity only once the “comical” nature of his project could be fully appreciated; Bataille’s own seriousness, however, continues to challenge his readers. If Bataille is right in introducing his own work as a “vast project,” its vastness should be taken to include not just inward-looking philosophy but also some very grand claims on the workings of social life. Investigating what these claims might mean for Bataille and for contemporary readers will be the central task of this essay.

*Introduction by way of ethnographic surrealism*

Georges Bataille (1897-1962) - French philosopher, novelist, activist, librarian – was first introduced to me as a ‘surrealist ethnographer.’ And why not? Since 1980, ethnographers have been looking more carefully for their discipline’s own intellectual origins; there they have found the historical roots of ethnography extending in surprising directions. James Clifford, for example, has compared the ethnographic project to allegorical fiction (1986); in doing so his goal is not to dismiss ethnography as false, but
to bring the same stylistic, textual, and representational concerns of fiction to bear on empirical writings about existing societies and cultures. This critique could prove disconcerting for an older Anglo-American tradition which sees ethnography as a thoroughly modern and positivist practice; however, for the discipline called the ‘Human Sciences’ \(\text{Sciences Humaines}\) in France, these comparisons were never in doubt. The Human Sciences in 20th Century France have long-seemed to outsiders a jumble of art criticism, philosophy, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and, lastly, \textit{ethnology} – an interpretive and at times idiosyncratic discipline concerned not just with specific societies but at the grounds for social and cultural life itself. To this mix, James Clifford adds one more origin for the human sciences – Surrealist politics. Clifford’s ‘On Ethnographic Surrealism’ (1981) searches through art and politics, as well as 20th century French ethnology and the Surrealist movement proper for a unique moment in the development of ethnology as a discipline. It is in this historical situation, where Georges Bataille and a network of associates set out to help define what anthropology might mean for avant-garde cultural critics in France, that I would like to begin researching for myself some other sources for both anthropology and philosophy; and I would like to do so through the writings of this historical figure, philosopher, ex-Surrealist, and ‘ethnologist’ Georges Bataille.

Bataille’s own contributions have been acknowledged only slowly. Historically he was as peripheral to French Surrealist politics as he was to French ethnology and post-war French existentialism; And he remains so, moreover, in contemporary theorizing. Bataille has a central, if very phantom role among the diffuse network of thinkers sketched for us by Clifford, though Bataille’s ideas are treated more or less only in
passing (1981:543–6). If Georges Bataille represents an interesting historical confluence of philosophical, literary, political, and anthropological ideas, does he also offer a comparable philosophical anthropology – one in which, as in Clifford’s studies, we can find renewed sources of historical closeness, inspiration and critique? Is there a Bataillian anthropology or only an occasionally anthropological Bataille? Can Bataille’s anthropological views be systematized or should their interpretation remain piecemeal; relative to the discipline – intellectual history, literary theory, anthropology, or post-structuralist philosophy – doing the interpreting? How can Bataille’s ideas and influences shed light on the particular development of French ethnology and Continental philosophy, as well as their moments of intersection? This introductory section will attempt to expand on these questions. The investigation introduced here will look for Bataille’s ‘influence’ in the broad sense of the term, whether past or present, in theory or practice, and whether labeled anthropology or philosophy.

Situating Bataille: A ‘Philosophical Anthropology’?

Taking ‘Bataille’ as a kind of ethnographic field-site in itself, however, implies limits consistent with any anthropological investigation. Clifford’s study was written in the wake of Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus 1986) and follows on that collection’s central project to take seriously the textuality and historicity of ethnography which is always, in a sense, writing on itself and from its own time and place. The Bataille who emerges from On Ethnographic Surrealism is very much a product of his time and place – but also a writer who has shaped that situation and the writing that follows it. He has become a writer who has helped to found, guide, and re-imagine a particular academic discourse. Today some writers, engaging with the Continental tradition in philosophy,
have grouped these discursive contributions under the label of a kind of ‘Philosophical
Anthropology’ (see e.g. Hutnyk 2004). With this usage ‘anthropology’ is often meant as
a philosophical abstraction – representing the basic conditions for the emergence of
cultural life and of being human as such – rather than in the sense of an *ethnographic*
tradition seeking to represent specific societies. But as Clifford’s investigation into the
situation of ‘anthropology’ in France in the 1930s suggests, these two senses are never
entirely distinguishable. Indeed in France it seems that what became the domain of
‘ethnology’ blended these two senses of anthropology in an historically distinct way.
What impact might Bataille, in his historical engagements, have made to that
philosophical or reflexive character of French ethnology which today remains so striking
to Anglo-American readers?

The very fact of a difference in the uses of ‘anthropology’ to which we might
attend is itself an historical artifact – a product of the various ways that writers in the past
and present have imagined and re-imagined what counts as ‘anthropology.’ I would like
to suggest Bataille as counting among one of the most important of these writers for
shaping a particular discourse on ‘anthropology,’ but in a peculiar way. Does this mean
that a study of ‘Bataille’s influence’ is limited to an historical survey? I would like to
suggest in the course of my project that this is not the case. We can infer from studies
like *On Ethnographic Surrealism* that Bataille, while always a part of a specific historical
*milieu*, had resounding things to say about both anthropology and philosophy through
this particular imagining of what ‘anthropology’ might mean. This insight is, I take it,
the reason for Clifford’s studies of historicized ethnography. Fortunately, however, the
history of George Bataille does not end there. Bataille’s work has been reviewed and re-
imagined by later generations of French philosophers who, through their own contributions to a discourse of ‘philosophical anthropology,’ are being taken seriously by contemporary ethnographers working in a range of traditions. But to sort out the resounding contributions of Bataille may involve imagining a new, and as yet very much unexplored, Georges Bataille who can give a related sense to these uses of Bataillian ‘philosophical anthropology.’ If Bataille’s own cross-cultural studies did not survive as good ethnography, in ways I will discuss, at least on the direction set out here they are an interesting philosophical anthropology in Clifford’s sense – that of a holistic, comparative, and humanistic investigation of social life - one that is perhaps properly and above all an implicit critique of one’s own society as well.

This essay is composed of four sections. This introductory section will attempt to set the scene for a thinker whose shifting interests in social practices, particularly in those he takes to be primitive; these interests, moreover, have recommended his writing to contemporary scholars for what those same scholars take to be its transgressive qualities. A second section considers Bataille in the context of his philosophical appropriation. As such Bataille’s anthropological ideas take on a certain mythic character; but it is a character which maintains affinities to ethnology. The third section examines Bataille’s ethnographic appropriations in *The Accursed Share* and considers them in light of these affinities. A concluding section finds that as such Bataille’s orientation has much in common with his contemporary anthropologists, but that Bataille's philosophy will mean that he must ultimately depart from a justified examination of other societies.
Georges Bataille was born in 1897, entered public life after the First World War and did his most influential writing before the Second World War. Few attempts have been made to thematize Bataille’s biography and work beyond John Hutnyk’s formulation that it is “the thinking of war, or rather a militant thinking against war” (2004:156) that should guide a reader’s understanding of both his life and his work. In the introduction to an issue of *Yale French Studies* dedicated to Bataille, Allen Stoekel cautions, on the other hand, that Bataille’s work resists systematization to the point that theoretically “nothing…is proper to Bataille” except the reactionary “impossibility” of his own writing (1990:4). What are Bataille’s concerns, then, and how can they be investigated thematically, if not systematically?

Biography of Bataille tends to cluster around several moments of crisis in his life; Bataille held only one academic post, as medievalist librarian at the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*. During his lifetime he was perhaps best known as the writer of several pornographic novels and the founding editor of several influential cultural journals, none entirely academic. He was ostracized from the Surrealist movement in the mid-1920s and founded the cultural, artistic, and ethnographic journal *Documents* in 1929. In the 1930s he engaged with the *Collège de Sociologie* intellectual circle and founded what is probably the only ritual religious cult to have an attached literary journal, *Headless* [*Acéphale*]. At once Bataille seems perfectly representative of the *avant-garde* thinker often imagined of this pre-war intellectual *milieu* in Paris; at the same time he injects the necessary amount of enigma and bizarreness necessary to complete this...
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representation. Accounts of this period often relate the story that, after a period of
discussion, the participants in *Acéphale* decided to hold a human sacrifice; everyone
agreed to be the victim but none would accept the role of executioner. After a search
failed to find any outsider willing to perform the sacrifice, even for a fee, the group
dissolved, like so many other short lived endeavors among Bataille’s circle (for more
context on this see Nodelman 2006:57).

After the Second World War Bataille resumed editorship of the literary journal
*Critique*, which would prove influential for emerging group of French philosophers
eventually known as ‘Post-Structuralist.’ The 1960s saw his death and, as these things
often work out, at the same time a renewed and serious interest in his philosophy and
writings. At the time of his death, though, almost all of his major publications were
largely ignored by his peers. He has been invoked as a primary influence on post-
modernism in academic writing and on the post-structuralist French *Tel Quel* journal and
its associated figures; Jacques Derrida (1967/1998), Julia Kristeva (1995), and Michel
Foucault (1963/1998) have written about him explicitly there. Jean Baudrillard has also
Bataille has been a guiding influence on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s work
(1972/1977) before being translated, examined, and assessed outside of Continental
Europe in the 1980s and 90s. Today English-language scholarship on Bataille has
become largely the domain of comparative literature (see Stoeckl 1990) which has seized
on the creativity found above all in Bataille’s fiction and his more esoteric philosophical
ideas.
Bataille’s life story and reception, then, are as heterogeneous as his works, which have included novels (1983), poetry (1999), philosophical studies (1992), cultural studies (1995), and theoretical oeuvres (Bataille 1987, 1988), often not only heterogeneous in content and style but openly contradictory. If this introductory section is concerned with the whole of Bataille’s work, the reviews that follow will have to be mindful of conflations between works themselves and these contexts of writing. Bataille has repeatedly called his own philosophy, too, a “heterology” (Botting & Wilson 1997:5) which, while not readily systematizable, attempts always, we might say, to invoke what is other, unmentionable, or excluded. Recurring operative terms in his philosophical writing include ‘excrement,’ ‘accursed,’ ‘refuse,’ ‘death,’ ‘sacrifice,’ ‘expenditure,’ ‘transgression,’ and the unknowable ‘sacred.’ Where in this diffuse philosophy should I begin to look for properly anthropological or even ethnographic insights and influences? If cultural anthropology is an ethnographic understanding of the particular description of the social Other – of making the strange familiar, in a popular formulation – then what should I make of a philosophy of pure strangeness, primitive difference, and self-conscious fetishization of the Other, the sacred, sacrificial? And in this case why should it matter what Bataille thinks anyway?
Representations of the Social: Introducing Some of Bataille's Works

Documents and Primitive Representation: 1929-1930

Having said little about Bataille's work except that it is 'heterogeneous' in both scope and content, we can at this point at least attempt to summarize Bataille's own concerns and problematics; what constitutes Bataille's concerns with the social, as it concerns us here, at least in its orientation if not in the essence of his philosophy itself? Bataille's departure from Documents around 1930, when he began to publish essays on philosophy on his own accord, is a good place to begin. Documents is, as we have said, a short-lived journal published from 1929 to 1930 and edited by Georges Bataille. From the second volume the journal had four permanent subheadings: “Archaeology,” “Fine Art,” “Ethnography,” and “Variety” (see fig. 1, Bataille et. al. 1930/1991:1). In each eclectic and surrealist-inspired issue, we find an array of cultural criticism, authored by novelists, artists, and ethnologists, and juxtaposed and organized by Bataille. In the second issue we might find, as Clifford tell us, an essay by the ethnologist Michèl Leiris on Picasso's portraits followed by one from Bataille on the portrayal of circus freaks (Clifford 1981:552). Documents also includes essays based on original ethnographic research from trips made by Leiris and fellow ethnological Robert Callois as part of the 1920s government-financed Mission Dakar-Djibouti. Drawing equally from his own sociological ideas and surrealist fiction, Bataille would himself intersperse within these essays short and ironic dictionary-style definitions on words such as "Absolute", "Man", "Eye", and "Slaughterhouse" (Ades & Bradley 2006). In issue five of the journal’s second year (Bataille et. al. 1930/1991:398-99), Bataille follows his encyclopedial entry
on “Mouth,” with a mock-curator tone on the subject’s cross-cultural and physiological significance, with an article on “Museum” (see fig. 2).

It seems that whenever possible, a fragmented and surrealistic representation of an object would invoke its more proper, authoritative, and discursive context. Thus Marcel Griaule’s article “Gunshot” (Bataille et. al. 1930/1991:47) was paired with a West-African carving of a native Ivoireian holding a phallic-looking rifle (see fig. 3). The carving belonged to the Musée du Trocadéro, the predecessor to Paris’ current-day Museum of Man [Musée de l’Homme], but Griaule must have been one of the first critics to present a primarily artistic interpretation for an artifact which so blatantly testifies to the colonial encounter. For Griaule this did not make the piece any less a work of native art, but nevertheless one deserving its own title in defiance of the Trocadero’s jurisdiction – “Gunshot.”
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Figure 1. The cover of Vol. 2 Issue 1 of Documents (Bataille et al. 1930:1) Reprinted Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1991.


Figure 3. Illustration accompanying Marcel Griaule’s article ‘Un Coup de Fusil’ in Documents Vol. 2 Is. 1 (Bataille et al. 1930:47) Reprinted Éditions Jean-Michel Place, 1991. Photo: Musée du Trocadéro.
Documents is certainly not the first volume to take ethnographic artifacts and juxtapose them to exotic and eclectic effect. For this purpose an eccentric effort like Documents might rank only as a footnote to more influential works of anthropology like James Frazer's The Golden Bough (completed 1922). But neither was Documents simply a showcase for unfettered surrealism or a Dadaist-like cacophony of cultural criticism. Instead, the question for this current essay should be this; what is Bataille, in his first public role as editor and chief juxtapositionist of Documents, trying to say about the value of including ethnographic writing and in situating ethnographic artifacts, essays, and works of art next to criticism of the works of his own society? This is a question, just as well, of the kind of primitivism Bataille might take away from his time with Documents. In other words, to what extent does Bataille believe that the objects of ethnography are something essentially primitive or pre-modern, to stand in contrast to the work of Western, which is to say 'modern,' societies. Indeed, at one point Bataille added the subheading of 'Primtive Art' [l'Art Sauvage] to Documents.

To what extent are these artifacts meant to connote the primitive as a reified thing - As a fetishized, which is to say imagined, pre-modern world of material culture and Art Sauvage which can be readily contrasted with Europe's Beaux-Arts or Art Nouveau? In juxtaposing the two, is the primitive meant to stand as an exotic alternative, or is it an ironic pairing which exposes what Bataille believes is supposedly primitive in French society of the 1920s? And if this is so, is the primitive still meant to connote what is developmentally-prior, in order to present a youthfully pre-historic challenge to the developed culture of modern France? In Issue 7 of Documents (Bataille et. al. 1930:399), Bataille writes not of l’Art Sauvage but “l’Art Primitif,” examining this “primitive” art of
children while invoking contemporary theories on the form of pre-historic cave murals. According to Christopher Green, the point was not to accept prevailing notions of the child-like nature of both pre-historical and contemporary “primitive” art; rather, Bataille sought to emphasize the possibility of representational “choice” that both children and cave painters had a special access to (Green 1998:210).

The ethnographic work of ironic juxtaposition and of deciding what, in such cultural mélanges counts as 'pre-modern' is, as we will see, still central to several anthropological traditions. Indeed, accusations of primitivism continue to plague what is arguably the most important institution to emerge from the network of ethnologists who also had a hand in Documents, Paris' Museum of Man (for that debate, see Kimmelman 2006). If Bataille had left Documents with any serious claims to ethnology, the primitivism of Documents might be good reason to dismiss a stature of 'Bataillian anthropology' outright, just as Bataille’s consideration of children’s art might cost him some stature as a scholarly prehistorian.

But Documents, as we find it under Bataille's direction, was not a serious or perhaps even a respectful attempt at cultural appropriation and criticism. Is this to say that Documents was a kind of pure cultural pastiche; one which Bataille would soon depart from to write more serious philosophy and, perhaps, return to sporadically when a bit of 'surrealist' ethnography might suit his philosophical endeavors? Though Clifford does not treat Bataille's role in much detail, Clifford's description of "the ethnographic surrealist" suggests another tact in understanding Bataille; "The ethnographic surrealist, unlike either the typical art critic or the anthropologist of the period, delights in cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms" (1981:549). Ironically, this assessment might
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bring Bataille's work in *Documents* closer to the motives of both surrealist art as well as the ethnology that would become part of the holistic *Human Sciences* in France, as characterized above. On Clifford's insight, the ironic juxtapositions of 'primitive' and 'modern' which Bataille directed serve to subvert essentialist and purist understandings of either primitive or modern art.

But whose understandings are being subverted? From Clifford's characterization we see that ethnology in the 1920s was about as young and tentative as the surrealist politics of *Documents* itself. If the ethnography contemporary with *Documents* still saw its task as a kind of salvage anthropology of distinctly different societies, it was still a task to be approached holistically, rather than essentially; in this sense early French ethnography, while certainly more methodical than the eccentric collections of *Documents*, nevertheless has something in common with that journal. The holistic approach to material culture found in *Documents*, to the extent that there is one among Bataille's eccentric editing, is not in accurately representing the wholes of various societies but in eclectically representing culture, in the singular, through a panoply of humanistic, critical, and sociological approaches. If this is the case, then the notion of "the primitive" which Bataille takes away from *Documents* is not so much a label for any particular group of societies; rather it is meant as something elemental to all social life as Bataille sees it. While this last claim is difficult to elaborate on outside of a close reading of *Documents*, I will return to it at the end of Section II in considering some of Bataille's later writings. It is, furthermore, a possibility I would like to keep in mind as we continue to touch on the portions of Bataille's works which are important for this study.
The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade: *Bataille’s Economics in the 1930s*

Bataille’s ethnographic appropriations, of course, did not end with *Documents*; they were, however, put on hold as Bataille began writing philosophical essays addressed to his peers. Sometime around 1930, while still working on *Documents*, Bataille circulated an essay titled *The Use-Value of D.A.F de Sade* (published 1975/1997). Although subtitled "A Note to My Current Comrades," meaning in fact his surrealist ex-associates, the essay is more of an abstract exercise in reappropriating a literary idol of the French surrealists, the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), for Bataille's own budding philosophy. *The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade* seems to be the most often excerpted writing by Georges Bataille for contemporary Anglo-American scholars. If this is so, it is not because *D.A.F. de Sade* is a particularly cogent or concise encapsulation of Bataille's philosophy; in fact, the essay leaves an opposite impression, containing instead, and in very condense form, much of the bizarreness, enigmatic style, and almost perversely lucid appropriation of a new vocabulary which would serve Bataille's writing for the rest of his career. While the essay makes for a surreal reading experience, its content is very much a renunciation of the literary Marquis de Sade, who concerned himself with fostering a sadistic aesthetic of personal meaning, and which the surrealists had come to admire. Instead, Bataille's appropriates de Sade's vocabulary into his own world, one which he describes in an almost mock-sociological or anthropological language. Indeed, the essay would seem entirely a pastiche meant to satirize his "current comrades," if Bataille did not take up so many of the themes of *D.A.F. de Sade* in later writings.
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Gone are the individual aesthetic or literary concerns which often characterize the Marquis de Sade. Instead, Bataille writes enigmatically that he wants to "introduce the values of Marquis de Sade" not as they relate to subjective concerns "but rather directly into the very market in which, each day, the credit that individuals and even communities can give to their own lives is registered" (150). This language, prefigured by the use of the Marxist term "use-value" in the essay's title, is strangely economic. Bataille quickly take leave of the figure of de Sade himself, but extrapolates the Marquis' language into a kind of libidinal, ritual, or even symbolic economy of "excretion" and "appropriation" (150). Through what objects, psychical, material, or even social-structural could one track this economy of ‘excretions’ and ‘appropriations’? Bataille gives a list; "sexual activity; defecation; death and the cult of cadavers; the different taboos; ritual cannibalism ... sobbing; religious ecstasy ... gambling; heedless expenditure and certain fanciful uses of money" (150). This 'economy' (though Bataille never uses the word) of ‘appropriation’ and ‘excretion’ thus ranges from ostensibly the most exotic objects of primitivism - cannibalism and cults - to behaviors like "gambling" that evoke the wealth of 1920s France. If the specific literary and artistic uses of de Sade drop out from this analysis, so too does the need to cite any specific, cultural, or artistic examples from any particular society. Instead Bataille talks of "primitive times" (151), a stage of development in which the management of appropriation and excretion was not as highly-regulated; the primitive, here, is replaced by what Bataille sees as the more-developed stage of "religion," defined as "the totality of prohibitions, obligations, and partial freedom that socially channel and regularize this projection [excretion or expulsion]" (153). Religion thus seems a kind sum-total cultural phenomenon, functionally
structuring these circuits of the appropriated and excreted. But what is proper to this 'economy'? What does Bataille believe is being expelled or appropriated through primitive or religious, ritual or economic means?

The dichotomy between 'primitive' rituals and magic and 'modern' religious organization might seem singularly primitivist. But in de Sade Bataille has taken from his time at Documents, if not a concern with artistic meaning or ethnographic artifacts, an orientation to ‘the primitive’ as a useful part of the variability, syncreticism, and impurities that have been characterized above by James Clifford; "The surrealist ethnographer," as Clifford has said in describing Documents, "delights in cultural impurities and disturbing syncretisms" (1981:594). While excising the ethnographic, artistic, or literary details that characterized his collaborative phase, in de Sade Bataille shift his interest to a philosophy of abstract impurity, a concern not so much with particular 'disturbing syncretisms' but with the disturbing as an abstract concept in social life. Bataille calls this proper object of his 'economics' the "heterological (sacred) object" (152).

Does this abstractness mean the theories of expulsion and appropriation in de Sade should be viewed as metaphorical or satirical? Bataille does indeed seem satirical when he proposes "Heterology" as the "scientific" counterpart to "religion": "Religion thus differs from heterology" (153), he says, while defining "heterology" in a footnote as "the science of what is completely other" (158). But if the ‘heterological’ seems to be invoked fancifully, it will also be seriously expanded upon and even defended in many of Bataille's later works, giving rise to a shifting and confounding writing style that leaves the meaning objects of his studies - 'excrement', 'the sacred', 'religion' - often in
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question. Indeed, the question of exactly what participates in his 'heterology' and what counts as a 'heterological (sacred) object,' might help us understand the scope and intent of many of Bataille's writings. What is the 'use-value' of Bataille's vocabulary, as introduced in *de Sade* and explicated in his later works? To survey this question I will introduce a few more pieces of Bataille's developing vocabulary.

*The Symbolic and Sacred*

In opposing terms such as "appropriation" and "excretion," Bataille might be accused of dabbling in semiotics; that is, he seems concerned with describing the structures of a societies' symbolic meaning for the people who participate in such societies. In *de Sade*, for example, Bataille proposes that the primitive, heterogeneous, and conflicted horror of the corpse is progressively replaced religious organization with the awe of God, "the simple (paternal) sign of universal homogeneity" (152). Is this to say, across societies, God and the human corpse *stand for* something identical in the social imagination, as part of a symbolic *sign*? Do they do so in an individual understanding or in some sort of sphere of collective representation? The empirical answer for Bataille, by the way, is yes (158); but this is beside the point. If these circuits traffic in what is heterological, they must in some sense completely escape the play of signification for their participants. Would Bataille thus admit that the objects of his wide-ranging economy have no real signification for any member of society? If this is the case, Bataille’s writing may indeed seem like a mystification; if so, it is one Bataille will struggle with in his later works. Exactly what Bataille might be trying to symbolize or
structure through these use of these ‘economic’ concepts of taboos, excretions and heterogeneous or sacred things will be considered in Sections II and III.

Bataille does seem to admit, as early as his *de Sade* (1930), that terms like 'excretion' as opposed to 'appropriation' or 'taboo' as opposed to 'transgression' are properly dialectic or dyadic oppositions that can only have meaning or convey signs relative to each other. What would count as a social 'excrement' if not relative to social norms about what ought to be appropriated? Is Bataille's heterology simply a difficult way of saying that societies submit to symbolic oppositions whose content seems heterogeneous? I will consider Bataille's affinity with this type of structurally dyadic understanding at the end of Section II. It should be said, however, that if we must parse Bataille's 'economy' between its sacred and profane elements - its opposition of taboo and transgression, appropriation and excretion - Bataille's interests lie decidedly with the latter element in each pair. It is these elements, of what constitutes 'the sacred' in its ‘sacrifice’ or 'transgression' which preoccupy Bataille during his short involvement with the Collège de Sociologie, an intellectual circle which included ethnologists and which published in the journal *La Critique Sociale*, between 1931 and 1934.

The value of individual intellectual activities such as writing, meditation, and erotic experience were important subjects for Bataille’s philosophy. They are concerns, however, which I will largely bypass in this essay. Bataille writes most earnestly about 'Heterology,' philosophy, and the individual in three of his major works, written during the 1940s and published a decade later, *Eroticism* (1957/1987), *Guilty* (1961/1988), and *Inner Experience* (1954/1988). Together these writings constitute Bataille's attempts to expound, ironically in large philosophical treatises, on this 'science of what is completely
other' with references to erotic and personal experience. His plans to collect them under a complete volume titled *The Summa Atheologica* [*La Somme Athéologique*] were never fully realized. Each work contains a wide-ranging and at times stream-of-consciousness series of notes on the emotions, erotic experience, meditation, and the value of a certain personal subjectivity. When these works were not inviting charges of 'mysticism' (see Sartre’s untranslated *Un Nouveau Mystique* 1947, discussed in Bodlt-Irons 1995:4), they were largely ignored, even by Bataille's former comrades among the surrealists and sociologists. It was during this time, from 1935 to 1945, that Bataille wrote many of his novels. But works of literary or poetic merit do not easily escape the concerns with 'heterology' introduced in the *de Sade* essay and expounded on periodically at this time.

"Poetry," Bataille tells us in that essay, "is hardly less debased than religion" (153); that is, like philosophy or religion, poetry is a cultural part of Bataille's economy. It is a part which has as its object, neither metaphors nor signs exactly, but these "excretions" and "appropriations," a sum of taboos, or rituals, and hidden sacrifices that for Bataille help constitute a society.

Philosophy too, Bataille says in *de Sade* and reiterates almost everywhere else, is a cultural phenomenon whose currency lies in taking what is heterogeneous or "excremental," and "homogenizing" it through writing (*de Sade* 152). Bataille, however, does not work very hard to summarize the social fact of philosophy, religion, or writing as contemporary practices. Instead, in the styling of Bataille’s increasingly esoteric philosophy, the practice of writing and subjective experience points to something else; the work of poetic writing or experience does something to expose or perhaps even transgress the play of taboo and limitation, appropriation, and excretion. The value of
Sadism, as Bataille introduces it in *de Sade*, is in the "concrete experience" of reading these taboo, appropriations, and quite-literal ‘excretions’ out loud; "It is only in these concrete conditions that sad social necessity...as well as poetic sentiments, appear without a mask and without any play of light and shadow" (*de Sade* 149). This experience, however vague, thus seems to me not a literary escape to fantasy but a kind of open reveling in Bataille's debased economy. It is this concrete experience which, above all, Bataille tries to invoke in the writings of this period. But this “play of light and shadow” is an experience which Bataille seems never quite able to capture, juggling his own insistence on this vague economy as a kind of social practice with his insistence on the importance of individual meaning, meditation, emotional or erotic experience. I will not consider these works in much more detail. However, I will return to the transgressive quality of Bataille's own texts in Section II, including several texts in which he reconsiders the task of representing specific and supposedly primitive social phenomena. The value of individual experience, to which so many of Bataille's philosophical ideas lead, will be examined at the conclusion of this essay.

Bataille, in fact, does not dwell on a basic opposition of 'appropriation' to 'excretion' much farther than his essay on *de Sade*. Even as early as an article in *Documents* (Bataille 1930/1997), he was giving the name "Base Materialism" to his economic ideas. 'Base materialism' is materialist in that it tracks what Bataille believes to be literal, material objects of his economy - of things sacrificed, or objects destroyed or expelled from society. Not surprisingly, Bataille does not seek to catalogue instances of 'base materialism' in history, ethnography, or economics. The term, however, becomes a
handy one for Bataille as 'base materialism,' like 'heterology,' traffics in what is excluded, unmentionable, or supposedly sacrificed in other systems of understanding, such as the economic materialism of Marxism. Thus identifying the circuits of his economics as ‘base,’ he avoids the need for reductive materialist questions of substructure as well as interpretive questions of what these economic objects mean or signify to existing societies. Bataille would not be interested in answering, for example, the questions ‘What, in your final analysis, is being ‘excreted?’ or ‘What cultural effects are these circuits actually producing?’  The success of his philosophy of ‘base materialism’ seems to be in its ability to, at least temporarily, sidestep these questions.

By the time Bataille was writing the first volume of The Accursed Share (1949/1998) he had dropped the term 'base materialism' completely in favor or a new one; 'the General Economy' whose principal mode of operation is in 'expenditure.'

Section III will consider Bataille's efforts to generalize his 'economy,' and to make it an object of study. The Accursed Share will also mark Bataille's return, at last, to specific instances of this 'excretion' - now called 'expenditure' - in societies which Bataille continues to distinguish as 'primitive' or 'modern.'
A Review of Current Literature

Bataille’s Oeuvres

The ten volume *Oeuvres Complètes* of Georges Bataille were first published in France in 1970, eight years after their author’s death. In their introduction, Michel Foucault begins “*On le sait aujourd’hui: Bataille est un des écrivains les plus importants de son siècle*” (1970 i). While French cultural and literary theorists were confronting this realization over thirty years ago, Foucault’s sentiment has only recently translated to the English-speaking academy – The words themselves, like much of Bataille’s *Oeuvres*, remain untranslated. This literature review will consider the growing body of material from and about Bataille in English - material whose influence over the last twenty years has grown, and in some cases receded, from the domain of critical philosophy and socio-cultural theory. To what extent is Georges Bataille a socio-cultural theorist, and what of his work can be considered philosophical anthropology? In formulating this question, I hope to draw up a review of the literature on Bataille that looks, like the preceding introduction to Bataille’s concepts, very different from those found in philosophical, literary, or encyclopedial introductions to Bataille.

To begin asking this question, this review will listen mainly for the influences of Bataille in many senses; influences both acknowledged and unacknowledged, historical and contemporary. ‘Bataille,’ then, is the field under investigation. To begin, however, it is important to situate the writing by Bataille that I have just covered with the writing about Bataille together in historical context. First, we can examine Bataille’s collaborative writing following the first world war, and the recent historical studies that have sought to map out Bataille’s writing in a certain post-Surrealist and avant-garde
milieu. Next, we can examine Bataille’s more mature works by way of the French critical theorists who re-discovered and popularized Bataille beginning in the 1970s - writers whose own Bataille-influenced work has become important for social and cultural anthropology. At the same time, we can consider Bataille’s critical reception in the US and Britain since the 1990s, and the place that reception has reserved for Bataille’s social and cultural theories.

_Surrealism and Sociology: Bataille’s early influences_

Returning to Clifford’s essay _On Ethnographic Surrealism_ (1981) is a good place to start reflecting on Bataille’s ‘early influence’ in several senses; it first situates Bataille as a writer who, in the context of post-surrealist literary collaboration, had a direct influence on 1920s and 30s French ethnography. Taking leave of Surrealist politics, Clifford tells us that Bataille’s _Documents_, and later the _Collège de sociologie_ proved that “ethnographic evidence and an ethnographic attitude could function in the service of a subversive cultural criticism” (548). This connection is not a new realization, but Clifford goes further, arguing that some characteristic theoretical orientations, often baffling to Anglo-American anthropologists, were “an immediate legacy of the surrealist movement” (553). Clifford examines the primitivism, museology, and anthropological orientations of Bataille’s associates, but there is little time for Bataille’s ideas themselves, except to say that they “link the twenties context of surrealism to a later generation of radical critics” (546), the 1960s post-structuralists. In this formulation Clifford’s essay is an ‘early influence’ of its own, introducing Bataille to Anglo-American anthropologists and turning a critical ethnographic glance at the practice of ethnography itself, all the
while prefiguring a tendency in writing on Bataille to treat the historical Bataille while leaving Bataille’s ideas to be interpreted through those working in Continental philosophy.

It was not until eight years after Clifford’s article that the major collection of the Collège de Sociologie’s publications, and with it much of Bataille’s early sociological or ethnological thought, was translated into English. This volume, *The College of Sociology 1937-39* (1979/1988) was originally edited by Denis Hollier, who has become the leading contemporary French authority on the Collège and Bataille’s place in it. Here Bataille’s lectures and essays, many published for the first time, are situated next to essays by the professional ethnographers who made up part of the Collège’s membership. Published in 1938, *Sacred Sociology of the Contemporary World* (157), a short collaboration between Bataille and ethnographer Roger Callois, exemplifies a shared and central concern of advancing sociological notions of the sacred through a peculiar, post-surrealist kind of “sacred sociology.” Theory and content here is not separable from style, the way the material is written; this is an insight, however, that is often reserved by interpreters for Bataille’s later work. The reinvention of founding sociological ideas like those of Durkheim has been treated by scholars only recently, but is readily apparent in Hollier’s collection; Hollier’s first footnote to Bataille’s first essay *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, situates the Collège directly under Durkheim’s influence and in contrast to Marxist cultural-superstructure ideas (398).

The extent of Bataille’s acknowledged sociological roots and influences at this time has received limited attention. One recent collection of essays, *Bataille: Writing the Sacred* (1995) is exceptional in its focus on Bataille’s sociological dimension in its
historical and political context. The collection contains an essay by Hollier, *The Use-Value of the Impossible*, which finds in Bataille’s journal *Documents* an attention to a radically non-Marxist, and perhaps Durkheimian, concept of cultural use-value that pre-figures the debates about Bataille’s dialectical materialism which, as we will see, surround much of Bataille’s later work (Hollier 1995). The collection also includes an essay by Michele Richman *The Sacred Group: A Durkheimian Perspective on the Collège de Sociologie* (Richman 1995). Richman, publishing in English, expands on her ideas of this group’s applied scholarship in her book *Reading Georges Bataille*, a “reading of Georges Bataille which focuses on the relevance of gift-giving for modern society” (1982: ix) – this unusually anthropological reading begins with chapters such as “Bataille reading Mauss” (16).

*Bataille and Post-Structuralist Theory: A renewed influence*

Much of the influential attention paid to Bataille by post-structuralist thinkers in the 1960s and 70s has made ‘transgression’ its watchword for both characterizing Bataille’s ideas and describing his writing itself. As Alan Stoekl’s introduction to the *Yale French Studies* issue *On Bataille* (1990) nicely summarizes, “…Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, and some of the ‘Tel Quel’ group members ‘wrote on’ Bataille, incorporating and appropriating his work, to the point where one could write only of ‘Derrida’s Bataille,’ ‘Foucault’s Bataille,’ if one chose to do so at all” (Stoeckl:2). In *A Preface to Transgression* (1963:1998), Foucault states that Bataille’s “death has sent us to the pure transgression of his texts” (31). After a critical reception marked by and attuned toward Bataille’s radicalism and deconstruction, how might reader’s recoup any positive
meaning for an philosophical-anthropology-grounded Bataille? Foucault’s own
approach, influential as it is in circumscribing ‘transgressive’ understandings of Bataille,
is instructive - for he sees in Bataille’s transgression an attempt to articulate a “non-
discursive language” (30) which problematizes Foucault’s own ideas of discursive
productivity. Thus a cultural taboo may be said to discursively produce the social
transgression of it, as Bataille himself has argued prefiguring Foucault, but how can one
understand the kind of radical transgression which Bataille sees at the heart of culture
and sociality themselves? As the writings that follow Foucault suggest, there is no
answer that does not already engage Bataille through his various interpretations and
collaborative contexts.

Clifford, for his part, writes that “Bataille’s lifelong project was to demystify and
valorize this ‘positive emotion’ of transgression in all its various forms” (1981:546).
While for Clifford this transgression is aesthetic-ethnographic in the surrealist milieu,
Clifford’s understanding can also be seen to follow Foucault in its emphasis on Bataille’s
transgressive creativity. This is an emphasis made among interpreters of Bataille in
literary theory. Indeed English-language scholarship on Bataille is now largely the
domain of comparative literature which has seized on the transgressive creativity found
above all in Bataille’s fiction. How far does this emphasis take us from Bataille’s
anthropological or cultural insights, which may seem no longer so transgressive but
rather outmoded, primitivist, or simply exhausted?

Critical interpretations of Bataille’s philosophy may point a way back to a
transgressive, even creative, Batallian anthropology; and it may do so through both
criticism of his anthropological ideas and literary critique of his writing. Alan Stoeckl
Part I: Bataille’s primitivism

continues, “Of course one finds problems with Bataille’s approach; and, one can argue, they arise exactly to the extent that his work repeats – or mimics, parodies – the orientations of an optimistic Hegelian model of historical development” (3). This is, in fact, the argument suggested by Jacques Derrida’s *From the Restricted to the General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve* (1963:1977) in which Derrida finds in Bataille an attempt to transgress not discourse but philosophical dialectics – Bataille’s writing is both on and about what Derrida calls a kind of radically ‘unemployed negativity’ and unrecoverable moment of contradiction. Thus, as Stoeckl writes, “Derrida shifts from a general *economy* to a general *writing*; the excessiveness is now to be found not in social constructions but in a movement of writing on writing” (3).

This deconstructed Bataille, whose transgressions are to be found in his own processes of circular writing, has dominated contemporary interpretations of Bataille to the point that, Stoeckl writes, “*nothing*…is proper to Bataille” except the interpretive “impossibility” of his own writing (1990:4). Thus Jean Baudrillard, in another influential interpretation (1976/1998), writes for example that the “answer” to Bataille’s anthropological question of sacrifice can be found “*beneath* the text, in all the interstices of Bataille’s text, but in my opinion not in the notion of expenditure, nor in this kind of anthropological reconstruction that he tries to establish from the ‘objective’ data of his day” (194).

This criticism has, however, not stopped some contemporary cultural critics from using the ‘objective’ data from *their* day to re-imagine the now subjectively transgressive writing of Bataille. Thus Deleuze and Guattari, next in the order of influential interpreters, surreptitiously borrow an entire Bataillian vocabulary to talk of *Capitalism*
and Schizophrenia (1972/1977), a perceived anthropological reality straight out of Bataille’s fiction which is, they insist, “the work of machines, not mere metaphors” (2). For the Bataille scholars Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (1997), the reality of a global ‘general’ economy that, like Derrida’s Bataille, is obsessed with transgressive representations of itself thus allows us to consider Bataille’s ideas of transgressive expenditure anew: Cold-War “Potlatch on a global scale” (29) followed by post-Fordist “unthinkable (non-commodifiable) modes of waste” (31).

For Clifford, it seems, it is the anthropological reality of Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus 1986) - the textuality and historicity of ethnography which is always, in a sense, writing partly about itself - that warrants a look at the surrealist aesthetic roots of one historical branch of ethnography. In the current milieu of reflexive ethnographic ‘realism,’ what would an ethnography look like which took seriously Bataille’s writing (and thus also, as these readings have suggested, his anthropology)? Rather bizarre, it turns out. The critical reader Bataille: Writing the Sacred begins with a short story by the anthropologist Alphonso Lingis about his voyeuristic and transgressive tourism in the field (Lingis 1995). The anthropologist John Hutnyk’s The Rumor of Calcutta (1996), a study of ethnographic and travel representations of the city, selectively invokes Bataille’s notion of waste, excrement, and sacrificial expenditure – both in what is said of the city and how it’s culture is consumed by tourists (152). Are these engagements with Bataille’s anthropology rather fanciful diversions, a kind of ethnographic tourism in themselves? Maybe. But in a critical response to Bataille that is always mindful of influences, and indeed of the cultural and historical context of a seemingly radical philosophy, they are in this sense truly anthropological engagements with Bataille.
Part II: Text and the question of origins: Bataille’s myths

*Appropriations: Derrida and Hegel*

Writing on the philosophical direction of Bataille's major works for an issue of Yale French Studies that is dedicated to Bataille, Allen Stoeckl issues a word of caution; "Of course, one finds problems with Bataille's approach,” he explains, “and, one can argue, they arise exactly to the extent that his work repeats -- or mimics, parodies -- the orientations of an optimistic Hegelian model of historical development" (3). While Bataille's Hegelianism is a problem for any sober assessment of his philosophy, it has also served as a major problematic by which his works have been re-interpreted. Among the first generation of influential criticism on Bataille, published shortly after his death by those affiliated with Bataille's journal *Critique*, several pieces consider Bataille's appropriation of Hegel to some extent (Hollier 1966/1998; Sollers 1968/1998). But perhaps most influential is an essay published by Jacques Derrida in 1967 and later included in his *Writing and Difference* (1978). It is titled 'From the Restricted to the General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve.'

While the question of Bataille's 'Economies' will be saved for the next section, the content of Derrida's influential interpretation might well serve as an inroad into Bataille's anthropological ideas. Indeed, if this essay is concerned with a general 'field-site' of Bataille’s appropriation, as well as with Bataille's ideas about social and cultural practices, then Derrida's critique can offer this essay much of what it has offered to contemporary scholarship on Bataille; that is, Derrida offers an interpretation that ties the place of Bataille’s writing, in ways soon to be defined, with the philosophical ideas found within his text. Accordingly, for contemporary scholars who in many ways follow
Derrida's reading, Bataille's 'Hegelianism' becomes not just a problem of faulty repetition but a problematic of - as Allan Stoeckl put it - 'mimicry' or 'parody.' The ability to read Bataille's ideas as ironic or textual devices is central to sustaining an arena of contemporary scholarship that proliferates despite - or perhaps because of - the outright contradictions, misappropriations, and general madness of Bataille's philosophy. The problems, and thus the scholarly problematics, of Bataille's use of anthropological or sociological ideas are no less severe. Thus after a somewhat brief explication of Derrida's Bataille, I will use Bataille's concern with Hegel to turn to his work on the origins of society and culture found in some of Bataille's more overlooked writings. While these writings will have to leave Hegel behind they will do so, as I will argue, in ways still captured by the concerns of Derrida's *Writing and Difference*.

In 'A Hegelianism without Reserve,' Derrida seems to consider Bataille's borrowings of Hegelian concepts as a problem not of appropriation or misappropriation, but of what we might call *textuality*. To say that Derrida's criticism, and the criticism that follows it, is aimed at the textuality of Bataille's writing is not simply to say that it is concerned with Bataille's writing style in addition to his content; the professors of comparative literature who write the bulk of contemporary scholarship on Bataille certainly did not need Derrida to point out the importance of literary style in Bataille's writing. Rather, Derrida's concern with Bataille's textuality is a concern with the very fact of Bataille's writing, considered on the whole; not Bataille's stylistic use of certain philosophies but the very fact that he chooses to write on such a philosophy in ways that, as Derrida argues, considered as such quickly become impossible to sustain in specific passages or written ideas as such. In other words, we will see that Derrida’s concern,
Part II: Bataille’s myths

perhaps unlike many current Bataille scholars, is not with a close reading of passages which might variously appropriate or misappropriate Hegel. Rather, it is the overall orientation, scheme, or hidden goal which submits to Derrida’s analysis, and with a minimum of specifics.

Before examining the fact of Bataille's 'Hegelianism without Reserve' we might note that Derrida's concern with textuality seems to be something shared with those immediate critics of Bataille who have come to be known as 'post-structuralists.' I will consider how Bataille’s writing might follow structuralism, and what a post-structuralist like Derrida takes that structuralism to be, at the end of this section. Foucault, for his part, inaugurates contemporary philosophical scholarship on Bataille by centering a common theme in Bataille's writing, that of 'transgression.' In an essay first published in Critique, the journal founded by Bataille shortly before his death, Foucault explains ambiguously that "Bataille's death has sent us to the pure transgression of his texts" (1963/1998: 31). The point is this; transgression is for Foucault neither a concept of Bataille's nor a description of his writing style. Rather, it is something that emerges from a holistic and critical consideration of his writing; Bataille writes on 'transgression' to the point that, considered on the whole, is transgressive. This mimetic quality, in which the way a concept is written and used in writing also illustrates that concept, is taken for granted in contemporary summaries like that of the Allen Stoeckl quotation which began this section. In introducing Bataille, Stoeckl did not claim that Bataille's philosophy or his ideas repeat or misappropriate Hegel. Rather, as quoted above, he claims that Bataille's "work repeats -- or mimics, parodies -- an optimistic Hegelian model of historical
development" (3). The choice of labels, ‘parodying’ instead of simply ‘repeating,’ is perhaps a function of how charitable the reader wants to be towards Bataille’s texts.

The tying of Bataille's 'Hegelian work,' his texts and their orientation, to the use of Hegelian concepts is what I take to be Derrida's influential insight. Exactly what is mimetic or textual about this link? A closer look at Derrida's 'A Hegelianism without Reserve' can hopefully clarify what I mean by these terms. In the course of doing so I will introduce some of Bataille's less-studied writings on prehistory and the emergence of society and of what he eventually calls art or material culture. Thus leaving Hegelianism behind, I then hope finally to apply some of Derrida's insights to Bataille's anthropological appropriations, to what Bataille sees as the primitive origins of society and, perhaps, of culture.

_Derrida reading (Bataille reading Kojève reading) Hegel_

If Derrida is interested in Bataille’s transgression, it is mainly in the context of the ways that Bataille’s concept of ‘sovereignty’ transgress the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel’s notion of ‘lordship.’ The term ‘sovereignty’ [souveraineté] appears sporadically in some of Bataille's writings, especially the book _Inner Experience_ (1954/1988). As traced by Bataille, 'sovereignty' applies to the individual who has overcome external limitations by turning toward the self; it thus means something like subjective affirmation, negating of external limits by affirming the self's subjective experience. 'Sovereignty,' a term whose meaning is only traced and hinted at in Bataille's work, thus seems an frustratingly metaphysical concept; that is, it is a concept detached and
abstracted from any real-world, empirically-verifiable context which might give that term meaning. We might note in passing that critiques contemporary with Bataille's writing did not look kindly on the metaphysical and abstracted nature of these concepts; Jean-Paul Sartre, no stranger himself to highly abstract thinking, called *Inner Experience* and its notion of 'sovereignty' a kind of obscurantist and "totalitarian" mystification (*Un Nouveau Mystique* 1947; quoted in Boldt-Irons 1995:4).

Derrida, however, leaves 'sovereignty' largely undefined and instead chooses to meditate on the vacuous choice of the concept itself. What he tells us is this; "All the attributes of 'sovereignty' are borrowed from the (Hegelian) concept of 'lordship' ... Considered outside its functioning, nothing distinguishes it from lordship" (119). Derrida thus makes a distinction between the specific *uses* to which the concept is put in particular places and the overall *functioning* as a mimicry of Hegel across texts. The point is not that 'sovereignty' is given all the same definitions as Hegel's notion of 'lordship,' but that its meaning is in a sense dominated and predetermined by the discursive weight of Hegel's philosophy; that weight is, at least in part, the influence of Hegel’s concept of 'lordship' on both Bataille and Bataille’s contemporary audience.

Just what is the meaning and influence of Hegelian lordship over Bataille? Although not mentioned explicitly by Derrida, the concept of 'lordship' was influentially defined for a generation of French philosophers by the lectures of Alexandre Kojève (1902-1968), some of which are reprinted as 'An Introduction to the Reading of Hegel’ (1980). Bataille is said to have audited three of the six years Kojève spent lecturing on Hegel in Paris. In these lectures, Kojève explicates the passage 'On Lordship
and Bondage' from Hegel's 'Phenomenology of Spirit'; specifically he reads it as a kind of synecdoche or microcosm of Hegel's philosophy of history in general.

Bataille’s interest in Hegel was thus selectively influenced by Kojève’s own reading. Given Derrida’s interest as well with the weight of Hegel’s philosophy on Bataille, we might thus single out for ourselves just a few of the facets of Kojève’s reading that are important for Derrida. The first is that Hegel’s concept of lordship is a part of historical progress for Kojève. History begins with those acts characterized in Hegel’s passage ‘On Lordship and Bondage,’ when an historical ‘Lord’ enters into an oppositional relationship with a ‘Bondsman’ or ‘slave.’ These acts constitute a Phenomenology or series of historical appearances whose truth, as far as philosophical investigation is concerned, is in what they reveal about the human realm of Geist, that is spirit or mind. This spirit is the domain proper to human thought, action, and history, and is sometimes contrasted by Kojève and others with nature. If we were to ask Kojève about the origins or conditions of society, we would likely get an answer that refers back to the inauguration of Spirit in the dialectic of ‘Lordship and Bondage.’ The advancement of history, and thus the progression of social life, is in the work of overcoming this initial opposition.

With an historical need to overcome what seems opposed thus established, we can add secondly that this work is dialectical. To the extent that this work of recognition or desire advances history, one historical worker will recognize what seems opposed to it in the other through the process Hegel calls the aufhebung, sometimes translated as sublation. The key quality of the process of sublation, as far as Kojève and eventually Derrida are concerned, is that it negates what seems opposed to it by the other while also
recognizing and thus conserving the truth or essence of what had once seemed oppositional. This recognition forms a kind of overcoming process that becomes part of historical progression. The lord’s power over the bondsman is not simply an arbitrary historical instance that is overcome, but rather an historically-essential moment whose truth is recognized in its overcoming.

Because it is these historical figures doing the work of recognitions, we can add lastly that this dialectical progression of history has for Kojève a subjective or affective component; this recognition proceeds not simply through external or material signs that one is working in the service of the other. Rather for a figure like bondsman to be a part of history, they must come to subjectively feel or recognize their place in the "aufhebung;" For Kojève his processes is mediated largely in terms of desire. The relationship between the external work organizing society and the affective element of desire, which Bataille subsumes under the label ‘eroticism,’ will be consider later in this section.

It is this conservative quality of the "aufhebung," in which one recognizes or desires the truth of what had seemed opposed by the other even in overcoming that opposition, which occupies Derrida's 'Hegelianism without Reserve.' The title’s qualification "without reserve" seems to have two senses; the first refers to Bataille's enthusiastic use of Hegelian concepts. As Derrida has said, "nothing distinguishes" a concept such as sovereignty from the totalizing milieu of Hegelianism, perhaps especially as it is related by Kojève. The Hegelian dialectic has a tremendously conservative power over the discourse that Bataille and subsequent philosophers find themselves in; the historical dialectic "signifies the busying a discourse losing its breath as it reappropriates all negativity for itself, as it works the 'putting at stake' [of lordship] into an investment..."
(108). Hegelianism for Derrida is capable of conserving, explaining, and appropriating every kind of negativity, opposition, risk, and transgression. Even sacrifice, so central and mystical a concern for Bataille, might be swept up and explained dialectically as a negative or oppositional behavior which could be overcome in the history of social progression. Every philosophical problem of transgression or of negativity is put to work, is *aufgehoben*, by the progressive and totalizing effect of Hegel's discourse.

Bataille does distinguish himself from this scheme, however, by a 'Hegelianism without reserve' in a second sense, a sense which is in fact textual. Bataille's writing aims for a kind of 'unemployed' negativity that remains so transgressive it is not sublated, overcome, or put to the work recognition, consciousness, or the effects of both in history.

"Within this writing," Derrida says of Bataille, "the same concepts, apparently unchanged in themselves, will be subject to a mutation of meaning... or rather will be struck by ... the loss of sense towards which they slide" (119). We might at this point say two more things about the *loss* of meaning. The first is that it is not simply an exaggeration or explosion of, in this case, Hegelian concepts; to *write* what Derrida calls this "unthinkable" negativity, "Bataille must, of course, say it, feign to say it, in the Hegelian logos" (108). The "loss of sense" towards which these concepts "slide" is thus liminal; unemployed negativity and the loss of dialectical meaning is the limit that Bataille's writing, on the whole, approaches. Secondly, for Derrida this is not a progressive process of destroying or losing meaning as we read farther into Bataille's text. Rather, with negativity as its limit, the text does not systematically negate the philosophical concepts it appropriates but rather, as Derrida says, "puts them into play"
This play is, however, closed off to the extent that Kojève’s view of historical progression and a useful negativity is given the last word, yet Derrida links Bataille’s negativity of play to the *initial* moment of risk and confrontation that establishes a lord over a bondsman in Hegel’s passage, a moment that Kojève tells us is quickly *aufgehoben*, conserved but overcome. Thus writing to *play* with Hegelianism, even as his philosophy seems to appropriate and follow it, Bataille is for Derrida "laughing" at a Hegelian dialectic he nevertheless follows "without reserve" (104).

Derrida's essay is, however, short on close readings of these concepts in either Bataille or Hegel. Partly this is because he situates the essay, as it is eventually reprinted in *Writing and Difference* (1978), as part of a larger critique of the function of meaning in philosophical writing as a whole, a critique in which he sees Bataille's 'negation' of Hegel as exemplary. Putting Derrida's larger project on hold, we might nevertheless want to examine the influence and application of his argument; how does Bataille’s writing contribute to a "loss of sense" and the "putting at stake" of a philosophy whose concepts seem to have plenty of sense, direction, meaning, and seriousness in themselves. What are these meanings which might be lost or, as Derrida argues, left unemployed or at stake rather than conserved? Though Derrida is never specific, he has in mind the transgressive writings of works like *Inner Experience* and *Hegel, Death and Sacrifice*, which seem to call for 'sovereign' types of subjectivity and transgressive actions in ways the philosophy he appropriates in his writing cannot sustain. Derrida has in mind also excesses, both social and personal, called for in the notion of expenditure or *dépense* found in Bataille's *The Accursed Share*, which this essay will consider later.
If Derrida's reading is so abstract and seemingly idiosyncratic, and so tied to his own philosophical project as well as to a general philosophical discourse like Hegelianism, what importance could his reading have for interpreting Bataille's rather curious anthropological ideas? Any why should Derrida’s interpretations matter, anyway, beyond his immediate influence in comparative literature or philosophical circles? What do theories about the possible and textual play of 'sovereignty' have to do with anthropological ideas, that is, ideas about society as it actually exists?

Given the explication of Kojève above, much of it left unsaid by Derrida, we might be curious to ask not about the tortuous movement of sovereign writing, lordship, or Bataille's play of Hegel's history, but about the origins of all of these things. If Kojève gives us a kind of origin narrative that encapsulates Hegel's view of history, what kind of origins does Bataille offer? Let's turn to some of Bataille's writings on the birth of history and the conditions for social life.

_Bataille’s lectures: The prehistory of Lascaux_

Stuart Kendall considers the question of origins in Bataille's work carefully in compiling the volume *The Cradle of Humanity* (2005), a collection of rather obscure lectures by Bataille on prehistory. Several of these lectures concerns themselves, at least initially, with interpreting the cave paintings found at Lascaux in France in 1940 and popularized by prehistorians like Henri Abbé Breuil, who saw them as some of humanity's earliest works of art, and thus of material culture as well. As Kendall explains in his brief introduction, interpretations of cave paintings were dominated by a kind of
functionalist anthropology, following James Frazer, that saw the origin of artistic rituals in their utility for "sympathetic magic" (Kendall 20). For these anthropological surveys, what were thought to be the most primitive or original rituals could be explained by their function: In the case of a cave painting of hunting at Lascaux - its meaning is conserved, we might say, and accounted for in its work towards affecting a successful hunt. Given Derrida's concerns, however, we might wonder at Bataille's affinity for an interpretation that seeks to conserve meaning as it progresses historically, from primitive art to the more modern; primitive drawing, according to interpretations such as those of ‘sympathetic magic,’ is explained in terms of its function; it is thus something primitive which is refined and, perhaps, historically overcome; a ritual drawing to affect a successful hunt is in this sense not yet art.

In his lecture 'A Visit to Lascaux' (2005), given in 1952 and translated in Kendall's collection, Bataille details for his audience the prehistoric drawing found in that cave. This short lecture, accompanied by slides, was presented to La Société d'Agriculture, Sciences, et Belles-Lettres. The audience, like Bataille, was probably most interested in an interpretive appreciation of the art on the cave wall, which were already taken for granted as both evidence of a recurring prehistoric ritual as well as some of the first ‘art’ ever recovered by archaeologists. Bataille warns his audience, however, that “my lecture tonight will be of a philosophical nature” (47). “Of course,” he adds, “it considers a historical subject,” (47) but a subject that, once fixed on the cave wall some time ago, becomes a proper object for interpretive excision and explication, and eventually some philosophizing. He thus dedicates his lecture to a close interpretation of
the kind of human nature or consciousness he believes is exhibited by one particular scene at Lascaux (fig. 3):

A bison, Bataille narrates, very carefully detailed, lies bleeding while a vaguely human figure, only crudely sketched and with a phallus and possibly a bird-like beak, seems to fall backward. Bataille says this:

"The thing [the crude humanoid figure] is obviously not human. But the thing is on the side of humanity; it is a tool, which in the time of Lascaux is all that separated human beings from animals. In addition, if man is not a thing, he will become one when slaves appear, that is, men subjugated to work. Herein lies something that deeply underlies the meaning of the discovery of Lascaux" (55).

![Figure 4. The scene in question at Lascaux. Kendall 2005, reprinted from the 1955 lecture. Photo credit: Hans Hinz.](image)

The lecture ends thusly, and this abrupt and enigmatic conclusion takes Kojève's parable almost literally; history, the introduction of man as a thing, perhaps a reified and cultural thing to be studied by anthropologists and distinguished from other animals, begins only with the world of work; it begins when one person enslaves another, and thus becomes lord or bondsman, and forces another's recognition. Or, as Bataille puts it with a very literal historicism; "slaves appear."
In 'A Visit to Lascaux,' Bataille seems concerned rather with a moment that is perhaps prior to concerns of lordship or sovereignty as detailed by Derrida. "The images they left us [at Lascaux] amply testify to a humanity that did not clearly and distinctly distinguish itself from animality, a humanity that had not transcended animality" (55); these painters did not believe they held a sovereignty from or mastery over animals in any sense. Instead, it seems, they felt a sympathetic equality. And while they made cave drawings to effect a sympathetic magic that would aid them in the hunt it was not, it seems, to gain power over beasts. Instead, and perhaps breaking with the then-contemporary interpretations of sympathetic magic, he tells us the ritual of the painting was essentially exculpatory, it "asks...for forgiveness" from the animal (55). Perhaps, then, the drawing was made not before the hunt but afterwards, drawn not to aid in the hunt but to cleanse what must be for Bataille a kind of primal crime, the breaking of a taboo. The animal victim and its wound are careful rendered, while the human is only sketched, incomplete, and recoiling. While Bataille notes in a following essay that the humanoid hunter is drawn with a phallus, the affinities between criminal transgression, eroticism, and taboo - all such plain themes in Bataille's literature - is something Bataille will consider only later and at a distance from the anthropological rendering given here. His short lecture on Lascaux, leaves this connection unstated, deferring instead to the anthropology of sympathetic magic and then to Kojève's boundary between prehistory and history - where the concerns of sympathetic rituals addressed to animals are quickly overcome in the beginnings of human history; concerned as it is with the world of work and recognition by other humans, this history is one of Spirit rather than in prehistoric and thus natural rituals.
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Is Bataille’s lecture thus merely a prehistoric preface to social concerns that are soon supplanted by a philosophy of history that, as far as Derrida’s Bataille is concerned, is properly Hegelian? The fact that Bataille ends his lecture with a nod to Kojève’s history of slave or bondsman might suggest so.

_Lascaux as a phantom origin of art_

Steven Ungar, however, suggests otherwise in a recent essay titled *Phantom Lascaux* (1990). Here Ungar considers another of Bataille’s writings on that same cave painting, _Lascaux ou la Naissance de l'Art_ (1955), which remains untranslated except for those passages which Ungar cites. As introduced by Ungar, this 1955 essay might seem to have initial affinities with the lecture 'A Visit to Lascaux' (1952/2005) considered above. Rather than meditating on a primal taboo, however, Bataille seems ready to consider Lascaux as a work of art with historical significance rather than as a piece of prehistoric ritual. Here Bataille casts the drawer as an original artist, drunk with creative and transformative power. In an analysis that might seem by now familiar, Ungar tells us that "the images of violence and change in the passage quoted above recall Alexandre Kojève's reading of dialectic movement in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* ..." (250). Recalling that Bataille's 1952 lecture sets the date of Lascaux firmly before Kojève-inspired history, here it may seem more like an originating moment of that history. However, as Ungar continues to explain, the creative scene at Lascaux also "supplements [Kojève's] concern for development toward an ideal social condition with a sense of ritual and ceremony more in line with the importance Bataille confers on prohibition and transgression" (250). Are these the same rituals of exculpation, and the same prohibitions
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on killing hinted at in 1952? Not exactly. Ungar reads the transgression as having more to do with the process of writing on the cave wall than with what such writing might have been intended for. Here, rather than enacting an age-old ritual of exculpation, the scene at Lascaux inaugurates the material culture of written representation. The violence, here, is in the fact the violence of writing and representing what are sacred things; the exculpation is in what Ungar calls the "effacement" of the semi-human hunter and in the evocative and hyper-detailed representation of the hunted animal. Ungar quotes Bataille to this effect; "Lascaux man created - created out of nothing, Bataille says, “this world of art in which communication between individual minds began" (253).

The humanoid figure thus characterized as ‘effaced,’ the drawings at Lascaux represent an original ritual violence. But is it accurate to say, as Ungar does, that this violence for Bataille somehow originates the violence of all human representation? This is clearly a kind post-structuralist or post-modern reading on Ungar’s part, and one which might be anachronistic if read literally into Bataille. But in reading this larger significance into Bataille’s 1955 writing, Ungar too participates in a textual understanding of Bataille. Perhaps Ungar might say that Bataille’s writing, in its textual obsession and transgressive style of representing, ad nauseam, the scene at Lascaux mirrors or mimics the object of that representation. In other words, Bataille’s writing on Lascaux does violence to the prehistorical anthropology of Lascaux, to be sure; in doing so, he projects that violent way of representing onto the scene at Lascaux itself. Bataille comes to see, we might say, the violence of his own writing immanently in the scene at Lascaux. But what can Bataille’s own writing be seen as effacing?

Ungar suggests that for Bataille the scene at Lascaux is not so much a work in
Kojève's sense, nor is a particularly self-conscious or historically original moment. In Ungar's *Phantom Lascaux*, the cave paintings are less an important prehistoric moment - a question for anthropologists of prehistoric ritual - but rather a kind of universal work of art *par excellence* that is as cultural as any other; "The elements of violence and alteration that Bataille sees [are] essential to *all* figuration, from prehistoric and so-called primitive practices to the neo-primitive art of the twentieth-century" (253). For Bataille, Lascaux is thus neither a prehistoric curiosity nor a literally historical moment that needs to be fixed in time as if it determined the origin of history. Rather, "Lascaux represents a *phantom* origin of art to the extent that the variety and condition of its cave paintings provide him with the elements out of which he, in turn, projects an excess of meaning that overwhelms him" (253). This Bataille, ‘overwhelmed’ rather than self-consciously proposing a thesis on the violence of all representation, is perhaps a less anachronistic representation of Bataille’s obsession with Lascaux

An ‘excess of meaning,’ but what meaning, exactly? Bataille’s theories of Lascaux of course say more about the scene of Bataille’s writing than about what may or may not have been the intention at the prehistoric Lascaux. This consideration is equally as obvious in Bataille’s earlier appropriation of prehistoric anthropology, which was likely outdated academically even by the time Bataille began writing about it. Under Ungar’s consideration, however, Bataille’s “project is less a true genealogy than a reconstitution of the conditions governing the passage from prohibition to transgression” (255). The word ‘genealogy’ is, I think, carefully chosen here. Ungar’s concern with Bataille becomes *textual* in ways perhaps similar to Derrida; that is to say, more simply, that Ungar is concerned with the meaning of Bataille’s *writing*, and not just the
conceptual tools he has at his disposal in studying Lascaux. These concerns are textual but not, however, genealogical; Ungar is not, like Derrida, concerned with the philosophical origins and inheritance, let alone the Hegelian inheritance, of Bataille’s language. This is not a concern with the origins of his writing but rather the ‘phantom origins,’ to use Ungar’s phrase referring to mythical origins of this and all work. Bataille does not give Ungar a genealogy but rather an origin myth – Bataille’s myth – of the roots of transgression. Its model is not to be found in a Hegelian dialectic that becomes something like ‘sovereignty,’ but rather in what seems like an enduring structuralist dichotomy: “prohibition,” as Ungar says, and “transgression.”

Ungar thus suggests another way to read Bataille; not mimicking or repeating a Hegelian origin and orientation but rather passing back and forth, like the cave painter he considers, in a way that is structured by the dichotomy between prohibition and transgression. What connection, however, remains between these textual concerns of Bataille’s writing and the content about which he writes? In other words, how does Bataille’s writing represent its own interpretation of representation and writing that is introduced in the consideration of Lascaux? What connection, moreover, do the prohibitions and transgressions of writing have to do with the anthropology of ritual that I have introduced in the previous lecture on Lascaux, with its own set of ritual prohibitions? These concerns were not of representation on the walls of Lascaux but of the eroticism and killing that needed to be represented there in order to be ritually ‘forgiven.’

Bataille’s concern with the specifics of Lascaux may seem to have taken his consideration of prehistorical origins in a different direction than the philosophy of
history Derrida attributes to Bataille’s Hegelianism. But Derrida’s textual insistence about the “loss of meaning” (Derrida 1967/1998:119) in Bataille’s appropriations continues to lord over interpretations such as Ungar’s; and this is the case even if the reader is concerned with the transgression of prehistoric acts instead of the philosophical importance of a concept like ‘lordship.’ We have seen this “loss of sense” and a slide towards textual interpretation in the various ways Bataille’s ideas about Lascaux can be interpreted. With Bataille’s initial account of sympathetic magic, the scene at Lascaux is simply the record left for prehistorians of a transgressive act, the ritual hunting of animals. When Bataille acknowledges that the scene might be part of an exculpatory ritual painted after the fact, however, Lascaux comes to consciously represent this transgression for those doing the painting rather than simply recording it. Ungar believes that it is this representation itself on the walls of Lascaux, and not the act of hunting they represent, that is transgressive for Bataille. Lascaux itself is now transgressive, and not merely representing transgression; moreover, the importance of ‘Lascaux’ detaches from recording a prehistoric ritual and now becomes a moment in the transgressive power of all representation. This assertion, Ungar explains, is Bataille’s own transgressive representation of Lascaux. These successive interpretations move from Bataille’s empirical concerns with what is represented to mythic or phantom concerns with representation itself; and lastly they move to downright confusingly textual concerns with Bataille’s own work of representation. What good would it do at this point to add Derrida’s own representations to this morass?

Does the discipline of anthropology have anything to say about origins which are as, Ungar says, phantom or mythic origins, and eventually textual concerns? And what
use does anthropology have for phantom or mythic origins, anyway? Considered as they function in Bataille’s texts, specific anthropological theories of the rituals enacted at Lascaux seem less important as empirical statements about what did or did not happen at the historical Lascaux.

**Mythic Origins in the Human Sciences:**

*Derrida on Lévi-Strauss' Structuralism*

For Derrida, however, the questions of what we have been calling ‘phantom origins’ in the human sciences are not readily separable from the empirical work of anthropology. In *Writing and Difference*, Derrida follows his chapter on Bataille 'Hegelianism' with a chapter called ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ which is largely about the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and which mentions neither Bataille nor Hegel. For Derrida, at the root of the human sciences, however, are concerns with social and representational origin which bring Bataille's writing much closer to the writings of Lévi-Strauss.

In this essay, Derrida presents us with an historicist account of the discipline which the French having been calling the human sciences; that is, Derrida situates the philosophies of the human sciences - with particular attention, somewhat like Clifford, to the development of ethnology - as products of their time and place. The human sciences, which for Derrida are characterized above all by the ethnological structuralism of Lévi-Strauss, form a properly historical discourse; one which Bataille, Lévi-Strauss, and perhaps Derrida himself have variously contributed to and borrowed from. But unlike Clifford, Derrida's historicism is short on any specific intellectual history; instead Derrida
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gives us an account of the development of philosophical anthropology, of the concerns -
which he calls 'metaphysical' as opposed to empirical - on the philosophical conditions
for human existence or social life.

Putting aside some of the finer points of what Derrida calls the 'history of
metaphysics' in Writing and Difference, Derrida tell us this about the way philosophers,
 sociales included, have attempted to explain the world around them; philosophy,
he writes, works outward from an unquestioned conceptual center. To say that one piece
of human behavior symbolizes something else, for example, is to invoke such an
intelligible center of meaning. Consider the philosophical statement that Lascaux
symbolizes a prehistoric crime; the empirical fact of the drawing - a sensible thing which
was put on a cave wall some time ago - is made a symbol only through some intelligible
center which can relate a symbol to the intelligible thing which gives that symbol
meaning. Without this intelligible and central realm, in which the empirical act of killing
can take on the meaning of a crime, it would be impossible to maintain that depicting a
hunting scene symbolizes anything. While this may seem like an unnecessarily basic and
belabored point, Derrida believes that the philosophical centers of meaning undergo "a
decentering" with what he calls "the thinking of structurality and structure" at some time
in the history of the human sciences. For the purposes of his essay, Derrida focuses on
Claude Lévi-Strauss as the chief 'structuralist' in question. Lévi-Strauss' structuralism
takes as its object not the centering of intelligible meaning from empirical observations,
but the what Derrida calls the "play" of the "sign" (281).
Explanations of social phenomena in terms of coded signs, composed as they are of reciprocally-related signifier and signified, replaces Derrida's philosophical 'centers' of meaning with an important element of arbitrariness. Consider an example by way of linguistic analysis; when the relation between a signifier-word and the object it signifies is understood as structurally arbitrary, questions that invoke some philosophical center of meaning become, in fact, meaningless. For a structuralist linguistics it would not be possible to ask the empirical or historical question of 'Which came first, the word or the concept it signifies?' or to ask which pieces, signifier or signified, ought to be privileged as central to conveying meaning. New words might be substituted for old ones or their signifieds could shift, with no philosophical center of rules governing these substitutions or 'play' of signs except the structural fact of the sign itself; this amount to the fact that the signifier and signified have no essential center of meaning except in their reciprocal, structural, and somewhat arbitrary relation to each other. As difficult as it is to define structuralism in these abstract terms, what is important for Derrida is the element of arbitrariness in the structure of signs, which allows a structuralist analysis to escape empirical questions, as we have seen by way of an example from linguistics. Derrida carries this insight into Lévi-Strauss' ethnology.

For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss' structuralist ethnology exemplifies the paradoxical mix of philosophy and empirical social science that characterizes the French human sciences. About Lévi-Strauss' writing Derrida tells us this:
"On the one hand, structuralism justifiably claims to be a critique of empiricism. But at the same time there is not a single book or study by Lévi-Strauss which is not proposed as an empirical essay which can always be completed or invalidated by new information" (Derrida 1978: 288).

Lévi-Strauss' writing attempts to collect explain real, empirical facts about what various people believe, how they live, and what codes structure and thus explain these lived realities. But when these codes are in fact signs with a decentered and arbitrary character, structuralism no longer submits to an empirical analysis. The existence of a sign, as imputed by an ethnologist, is not something that can be readily proved or disproved by recourse to more empirical facts about a certain society. To offer an example, consider the scene at Lascaux. What if the crime of killing, which Bataille believes the drawings attempt to exculpate, functions structurally like a sign, with two reciprocally-related parts; There is a prohibition against killing animals, and its transgression in hunting. One may become a vegetarian, or one may hunt obsessively; each action has a social meaning only relative to the other, in their structural opposition of a taboo and transgression. Without a relationship to taboo, transgression means nothing as such. Thus conceived, it would not be possible, on this analysis, to take an empirical survey to determine whether there is or is not a rule against killing animals in a certain society.

Which act came first, the taboo or its transgression? Which act, the hunting or its abstention, is the real rule of a society? For Derrida, these questions drop out as well: "More concretely, in the work of Lévi-Strauss it must be recognized that the respect for structurality, for the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralization of time and history" (291).
The ahistorical nature of structuralist ethnology is to be found above all in Lévi-Strauss' consideration of the opposition between nature and culture at the beginning of his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969). Derrida quotes Lévi-Strauss on this:

"Above all, it is beginning to emerge that this distinction between nature and society ('nature' and 'culture' seem preferable to us today), while of no acceptable historical significance, does contain a logic, fully justifying its use by modern sociology as a methodological tool" (284).

This logic, for Lévi-Strauss, is the structural logic coded primarily by what he calls the incest taboo. Derrida explains; "The incest prohibition is universal; in that sense one could call it natural. But it is also a prohibition, a system of norms and interdicts; in that sense one could call it cultural" (283). The incest taboo is perhaps an ethnological structure *par excellence* in that it completely escapes the question of history and empirical origins; like the arbitrary relation of a sign, it is an origin in itself. Lévi-Strauss thus calls it more of a "methodological tool," an ethnologically-useful myth. Derrida would call it part of this neutralizing "*originality* of structure." We might call it Lévi-Strauss' own inauguration of phantom social origins. Let's see what Bataille has to say about it.

*The Origins of transgression in Bataille's 'History of Eroticism'*

The second volume of Bataille's *The Accursed Share* (1954/1991) is composed mostly of a reprinted manuscript called 'The History of Eroticism' which was written some time earlier. Subtitled 'An Essay on the General Economy,' *The Accursed Share* is in fact a 700-page tome that spans three volumes and contains most of the ethnographic appropriations and cultural criticism Bataille would make in the course of his writing.
The second volume begins with a reprinted review of Lévi-Strauss' *Elementary Structures of Kinship*. I will explore some other parts of *The Accursed Share* more fully in Section III; at this point, however, Bataille's writings on the origins of what he calls 'Eroticism' are useful in grounding the rest of his understanding of society, culture, the role of ethnological explanation, and the meaning of his 'general economy' as we will explore those things further.

As enigmatic as this work is, Bataille's review of Lévi-Strauss' incest taboo is fairly concise and clear, and as a 'methodological tool' Bataille makes full use of this concept. He tells us that "Man's essence is found in the prohibition of incest, and in the gift of women, which is the prohibition's consequence" (Bataille 1954/1991: 56). Indeed, Lévi-Strauss writes in the beginning of *Elementary Structures* that the incest taboo, while like a universal fact of nature, in fact structures the origins of culture. Not able to partner among close family members, people - or men in Lévi-Strauss' formulation - must exchange potential mates with other families, and the problem of organizing kinship and the relations among groups is inaugurated.

As Derrida has hinted, part of what makes this taboo 'natural' is that it is generally and universally obeyed. Bataille, however, stresses the possibility of the natural order’s transgression which becomes so important to Bataille’s own conception of culture: "The prohibition does not change the violence of sexual activity, but by founding the human milieu it makes that violence something that animality did not know: the transgression of the rule" (57). Bataille sees the incest taboo as one sexual prohibition among many, structuring and thus originating the possibility of what he calls human ‘eroticism.’ Even
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"the gift of women," is an erotic "substitution" (56); respect of prohibitions is a "detour" of erotic violence (57). The truth of these things, as elements of culture, is in the breaking of the rule.

But to extract this truth in transgressions that Bataille now calls properly erotic, he also departs from a concern with outward social organization or the shared structures that are so organized. Whatever the incest taboo might mean for individuals, its existence can only be inferred for Lévi-Strauss by the outward signs of kin relationships; “the gift of women” is a structured act that occurs despite what any individual might feel about such a gift. Bataille’s shifting emphasize on eroticism, however, introduces the question of personal desire, which will be addressed in the conclusion of this essay. Kojève might at this point tell us, however, that where there are dimensions of personal desire there can also be accounts of personal development or self-consciousness beyond the myths that are needed to introduce a society’s structure. Interestingly, Bataille does not cite Freud except briefly as one "misstep" in accounting for the origins of eroticism (31). What emerges instead in Bataille's review of the incest taboo is indeed something like a Hegelian model of development. Thus Bataille does not speak Lévi-Strauss' 'decentering' or problematization of the natural/cultural divide, as does Derrida. Instead Bataille speaks of the "transition from nature to culture": "What we are, hence all that we are, would be involved in the decision that sets us against the vague freedom of sexual contacts" (31). As he says further on, "Man's sexual life cannot be considered as a simple datum, but rather as a history. It is first of all the negation of animal freedom, but the rules it takes on are provisional" (49). But if Bataille calls this negation part of a developing history, it is alsoconcertedly ahistorical.
If we want to follow Derrida and read this 'history' as Hegelian, the negation of animality in the recognition of new rules is not quite a completed process of sublation, or conserving and overcoming. There remains an unemployed negativity, a fact of transgression which betrays the general rule of even Lévi-Strauss' prohibitions. These prohibitions quickly surpass the original myth of an incest taboo to constitute a field that includes eroticism and, as Bataille explains, its "complement" in "gift-giving" (56), which begins with the giving of kin in marriage. What might transgress the gift in all its forms for Bataille will be considered in the next section of this essay. For Bataille, the truth of these structures, the substance of something like ‘eroticism,’ is not in the rule but in the transgression which that rule makes possible. Transgression, conceived against structural taboo, becomes something like Derrida's radical Hegelian negativity; that is, it may seem to be ‘employed’ or invested, like Lévi-Strauss’ “methodological tool” (Derrida 1978:284), in its structural relation to a taboo. Just as well, in its personal dimension transgression might be usefully invested, as we have speculated, in a history of erotic self-consciousness. However, considered in its overall functioning in Bataille’s text, some of this negativity will have to remain unemployed, itself transgressing any useful relationship with a taboo, structure, myth, or development. An imagining of what might remain transgressive is, as we will see, Bataille's overall project in The Accursed Share. What relationship, then, does transgression have to what Bataille and Lévi-Strauss have been calling 'culture,' to the specific field of prohibitions which constitute structural rules?

For Lévi-Strauss, a structure like the incest taboo remains a general, universal, and ahistorical rule - but a rule that can be obeyed only as a norm in a specific cultural
context. It thus ‘denatures,’ as Derrida has told us, the nature/culture dichotomy. Lévi-Strauss addresses himself repeatedly to the empirical specificity of particular cultural norms: As Derrida has said, "There is not a single book or study by Lévi-Strauss which is not proposed as an empirical study" (Derrida 1978: 288). At the same time, Lévi-Strauss' structuralist coding submits to a generality which thwarts historical or empirical questions. Lévi-Strauss mode of explanation, which desires to address both of these needs, Derrida identifies as "myth" telling, "the mythological discourse" (286).

The discussion of myth, of which a primal incest taboo is one, satisfies Lévi-Strauss' need for phantom, general, ahistorical origins of society and culture. But Lévi-Strauss' structuralist analysis requires a sort of phantom origin of its own, we might say. This 'origin' we find in Lévi-Strauss' "mythological discourse," his writing of and about myths at the same time. This insight Derrida shares about Lévi-Strauss, like his insight into Bataille's writing, is once again properly textual. Derrida believes that Lévi-Strauss' discussion of myths must take the form that which it discusses. Lévi-Strauss says as much himself at one point. In The Raw and the Cooked (1969), quoted at length by Derrida, Lévi-Strauss explains that "it follows that this book on myths is itself a kind of myth" (Derrida 287). Unlike the various interpretations of Bataille, a reading of Lévi-Strauss leaves no doubt that he is completely self-conscious of the textual concerns in writing about myths which are both universal and specific, phantom origins and an empirical or historical reality; Lévi-Strauss is, in other words, completely aware of the mythic quality of his own writing, whatever that mythic character might be.
What about Bataille? His transgressive writing style does not leave it clear to the reader whether, as with the question of Bataille's Hegelianism, he is self-consciously mimicking that which he appropriates or unconsciously and obsessively repeating it. At least as he introduces his concerns in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille borrows as much from the Lévi-Strauss’ structuring of prohibition as he does from the development of a Hegelian discourse. Bataille's inaugurating emphasis on transgression has a kind of mythic quality in itself; transgression emerges only relative to a society or culture of prohibition, he admits, but it is always something that, as we will see later on, remains immanent in every specific piece of social life. Like the 'phantom' or mythic origin of effacing a crime at Lascaux, it does not submit to historicism; in a sense it does not matter whether the specific caves at Lascaux originated anything on any particular date, just as it does not matter for Lévi-Strauss if any particular society ever originated the incest taboo in any historical moment. In the next section I will discuss how Bataille tries to give a 'general' and 'economic' form to what have become his myths of transgression. While Ungar maintains that Bataille’s phantom origins at Lascaux are concerned, above all, with the work of art and writing, in *The Accursed Share* Bataille makes claims, as we will see, on acts which have their place in society and culture. Like Lévi-Strauss, at the same time Bataille writes on general myths he also addresses himself curiously to empirical realities of specific societies. What use does Bataille have for specific ethnographic appropriation, given the textual concerns with Bataille's writing that we have raised here?
Part III: Potlatch economics: The primitive in *The Accursed Share*

*Bataille’s Argument: Economics, Empiricism, and Ethics*

*The Accursed Share* is Bataille's longest, most expository, and - if Bataille's own statements are to be believed - most important work. Ostensibly addressed to problems of economics, it offers a more general philosophy of social life which in fact has a sensational and mythic character. Much as Derrida has said of Levi-Strauss' works, however, there does not seem to be a single section of *The Accursed Share* which does not make empirical claims. At the heart of *The Accursed Share* is an argument about how economics, what he calls the "General Economy," functions. Bataille presents *The Accursed Share* as an "essay on the General Economy" (1), on the structure of all economic life worldwide. Like Bataille's ‘economy’ in *The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade*, which mingles material exchange with the social circulation of taboo, sacrifice, and ritual exchanges, the General Economy is an economy in the largest, cultural sense. Anything that can be seen as produced or exchanged socially is up for analysis in the span of *The Accursed Share*. Bataille’s interest in transgression and in heedless, erotic experience too becomes reformulated as a part of his general economy; he calls the *transgressive* rule of the general economy “expenditure” or *dépense*. The general economy is perhaps also an ‘originating structure’ in Derrida's sense, as we will see; it grounds Bataille's interest in transgression and imbibes it with both a natural existence and a cultural significance. Enigmatically, Bataille will address his argument to both sociological "thinking" and philosophical "ethics." It is a radical truth which, once accepted as an empirical reality, transgresses our own cultural notions of right and wrong. Just how is the general economy thus defined?
In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille defines the "general economy" as the sphere of economic activity "in which the 'expenditure' (the 'consumption') of wealth, rather than production, is the primary object" (*AS* 9). The need for social expenditure, or *dépense*, addresses what Bataille calls an 'accursed share' [*un part maudit*] of social production that necessitates, or is destined for, wasteful, sacrificial, or violent consumption. By contrast, Bataille identifies contemporary capitalism, and the bourgeois economic rationale that underpins it, as merely a form of 'restricted economy' that is uniquely compelled to deny the significance of *dépense*. The ‘restricted economy’ sees instead as its principle the productive use of surplus, the balancing of accounts.

As in previous works, originally ethnological notions such as ritual sacrifice and 'the sacred' become important themes; as such, Bataille's morbid orientation towards sacrifice, expenditure, and 'the accursed' seem excellent grounds for inquiry into his transgressive qualities as a writer. As far as the opening chapters of *The Accursed Share* are concerned, however, it is not Bataille's transgressive ideas that justify his strange anthropology or economics but rather the other way around. As Bataille explains in section *The Meaning of the General Economy*:

"I will simply state, without waiting further, that the extension of economic growth itself requires the overturning of economic principles - the overturning of the ethics that grounds them. Changing from the perspectives of the *restricted* economy to those of the *general* economy actually accomplishes a Copernican transformation: a reversal of thinking - and of ethics. If part of wealth is doomed to destruction or at least to unproductive use without any possible profit, it is logical, even *inescapable*, to surrender commodities without return" (*AS* 25).

In this passage, almost a general thesis statement of *The Accursed Share*, Bataille presents his transgressive ethic and celebration of sacrifice as an apparently empirical
induction - a Copernican transformation' resting on the general observation of how societies use their wealth - and from that, an “ethical” concern with how we, the readers and participants in modern national economies, might use ours. This is “A reversal of thinking - and of ethics” sustained seemingly not by radical mythologizing but by a kind of empirical fact of the matter. What follows in the first volume are several ethnographic case studies in *dépense* which conclude with Bataille's serious and ethical consideration of the then-ongoing "Marshall Plan" (169-190). This section of *The Accursed Share* makes for an interesting side-note to Bataille’s discussion of the General Economy. In this section on ‘The Marshall Plan,’ which Derrida in fact refers to as “muddled” in a footnote to his ‘Hegelianism’ essay, Bataille earnestly applies his notion of *dépense* to post-war reconstruction. Interestingly, he argues that the frenzied and triumphant American national economy, rather than growing its military capacity any further, ought to make a gift of its own *dépense* in the form of transfers of cash to more war-ravaged countries. How serious is Bataille’s argument? “It will be said that only a madman could perceive such things in the Marshall and Truman plans,” he writes. “I am that madman” (197). While Bataille presents his *Accursed Share* as a careful description of economic life, it ends in self-consciously ‘mad’ prescriptions. While we might expect contemporary interpretations to privilege the latter as *The Accursed Share*’s ultimate purpose, we should remember that for Bataille all of his polemical and ethical concerns derive from seemingly empirical observations about the rule of *dépense*. Allen Stoeckl says as much in his consideration of Derrida, who “gains sophistication only at the cost of losing the acuity of Bataille's critique, grounded as it is in the realm of seemingly tangible things” (Stoeckl 3).
How seriously are we to take these 'tangible things' when they become properly anthropological in scope; when he makes claims on things that, for example, ‘are doomed to destruction’ in a society? I would like to start with Bataille's own reasons for choosing to ground his 'reversal of thinking' in several ethnographic examples. Rather than worrying about losing a sophisticated distance from the tangibles of Bataille's study, we might ask instead why Bataille decides to stay so close to his tangible ethnological or cultural concerns. Just what are those concerns, anyway?

Mauss’ Gift and the ‘total social fact’ of potlatch

For Bataille, pre-capitalist or non-capitalist modes of expenditure are most strikingly presented in the case of 'potlatch.' Potlatch is a model of gift-giving popularized by Marcel Mauss in his influential study *The Gift* (1925/1967). The word Potlatch belongs to a group of Northwest American Indians, which Mauss appropriates as a label for types of 'primitive' gift-giving in several societies. These potlatch societies share with the Northwest Indians what he calls a particularly 'agonistic' and extreme nature. To perform a potlatch, a tribal chief leader will patiently accumulate the material wealth and production of his social group only to suddenly and extravagantly waste, gift, or even destroy that wealth as another group looks on. In its most extreme form, the Kwakiutl Indians were said to spend years patiently assembling engraved copper plates, only to cast those plates into the ocean in a single ritual performance.

The effect these accounts might have for a reader of ethnography is indeed sensationalistic. Bataille admits as much: "Since the publication of Marcel Mauss' *The Gift*, the institution of potlatch has been the object of a sometimes dubious interest and
curiosity," explains Bataille in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* (1954/1988: 202). This is because, he continues, "Potlatch enables one to perceive a connection between religious behaviors and economic ones" (203). By this Bataille might mean that potlatch, like 'The Gift,' takes the form of a "total social fact" (Mauss 67) with a holistic social presence that is not reducible to single economic, psychological, or functional terms but involves in some way the whole of society. For Mauss, the total social fact was an attempt to theorize the Gift in its holistic and multifaceted reality. As a total social fact, gift-giving as it is practiced in specific societies is not readily reducible or explainable in its economic or religious terms. Rather, in its totalizing character we might say that gift-giving explains these many facets of society and that these facets of society, economic, religious or otherwise, explain gift-giving. An understanding of the total social fact of gift-giving for any given society thus overcomes what might seem an inextricable contradiction: Any gift, Mauss says, "in theory voluntary and disinterested but in fact obligatory." Viewed reductively, the gift has a seemingly religious, personal, or affective significance in generosity while in fact obeying a seemingly economic logic of reciprocation. Potlatch was one such form of the contradictory logic of The Gift for Mauss.

Potlatch, according to Mauss, is characteristic of certain Northwest American Indians, for whom the term meant "to nourish or to consume" (4). Mauss defines potlatch as "an agonistic type of total prestation" (5) in which entire families or clans give away or destroy everything they can muster in order to bolster the rank or prestige of one leader and challenge another. Like other Maussian gifts, the potlatch carries "three obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay" (37).
It is interesting to note however that Mauss distinguishes potlatch from other gift-giving mainly by its basic and affective nature: "The potlatch, so unique a phenomenon, yet so typical of these tribes, is really nothing other than gift-exchange. The only differences are the violence, rivalry and antagonism aroused, in a lack of concepts [i.e. in less explicit codes of reciprocity and gift-acceptance], and in a simpler structure" (Mauss 33). The potlatch is a kind of "total prestation" that is developmentally prior to the more advanced and individual "spirit of gift exchange" which Mauss identifies in other tribes with less destructive or 'agonistic' practices (45). It is important to remember that the more basic or "total" character of potlatch (Mauss 36) does not however reduce the need for obligation, reciprocation, honor, or credit: In fact the "origin of credit" is not, as economists argue, a modern advancement of barter but is in fact immanent in "the range of customs neglected by lawyers and economists as uninteresting: namely the gift, which is a complex phenomenon especially in its ancient form of total prestation [potlatch]" (34). Before taking up Bataille's conception of potlatch we should remember that for Mauss the potlatch was not necessarily developmentally prior to a 'restrictive economy' of credit and obligation, despite, as Mauss says, its more “simple structure”; rather for Mauss the potlatch is one of the most complex and rich 'total social fact' expressions of what could otherwise not be explained in terms of its reductive economic function.

With this Mauss-derived notion of potlatch in mind, we might ask how it is that Bataille believed the potlatch recommended or evidenced his ideas of the general economy escaping the "dubious interest and curiosity" that Bataille's fellow ethnologists read into this sensational practice (AS 68). But before looking into Bataille's own motives, projections, and fantasies involving the potlatch it is worth noting that Bataille's
interest in the potlatch has much in common with his earlier projects with French
ethnographers, even in their collaborative and early work of *Documents*. James Clifford,
for example, says of *Documents*:

"...it would be hasty to dismiss it as an aberration, a personal creation of
the 'impossible' Georges Bataille...It exemplified, rather, an extreme
sensitivity ... to the overdetermined character of what Mauss called 'total
social facts" (Clifford 1981: 553).

This assessment of *Documents* we might well keep in mind in considering *The
Accursed Share*. The totalizing nature of 'potlatch' leaves the concept quite vulnerable to
the imagination and motives of the interpreter and any number of vague explanations of
“total significance” might be invoked to explain such a sensational practice. This
vulnerability to interpretation, however, is a necessity when the phenomenon must be
described in a holistic way. As Clifford continues:

"Reality, after the surrealist twenties, could never again be seen as simple
or continuous, describable empirically or through induction...this
assumption, that reality is never directly accessible, but exists only in
codes (always plural) which represent it, was an immediate legacy of the
surrealist movement" (553).

It is in this milieu, an odd combination of Bataille's Maussian and surrealist
pedigree, that we might best think of the empirical and theoretical work of *The Accursed
Share*. And if Bataille presents his 'reversal of thinking - and of ethics' as an induction
from the ethnographic evidence (*AS 25*), it does not need to be a straight-forward
empirical gathering of data. But of what, exactly, does Bataille's anthropological
investigation of potlatch consist?
Bataille’s General Economy

A Natural Contradiction

Potlatch, for Bataille, "has a privileged place in general economy" (69). Once again, it is not clear whether empirical instances of potlatch are merely exemplary of his model of a general economy, or whether potlatch can be extrapolated to describe something larger or more essential to the concrete reality of a general economy. Perhaps most obviously, above other gift-giving rituals potlatch does involve the most material waste. "The general economy," is as Bataille describes, "the movement of energy on the globe" in both production and consumption (21). As set forth in the section The Meaning of the General Economy, this argument is a surprisingly naturalistic and mechanical representation of economic forces:

"I will begin with a basic fact: the living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of the system (e.g. an organism)...if the system can no longer grow...it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically" (21).

If this story functions as Bataille's own origin myth in the first volume of The Accursed Share, it also seems to lack the ambiguity between universal nature and norm-generated culture that we find with the structuralist myths of Levi-Strauss. Dépense is practically a process of the natural environment, while the excess of energy that forms the ‘accursed share’ seems naturally destined for such expenditure. The sun, for Bataille, is quite literally the catalyst for the general economy- and its obligation to give energy without return forms the rule of general economic life rather than the exception – and all of this in stark contrast to
the law of scarcity that informs our contemporary restricted economy. As introduced in *The Accursed Share*, the rule of the general economy is almost shockingly naturalistic; is Bataille to maintain that the wealth spent in potlatch is the human cultural equivalent of the energy generated by a living organism? The total social fact of this unique and complex phenomenon thus seems reduced to an almost functionalist or mechanical-environmental sort of explanation: These societies are burdened with a literal surplus of natural wealth which their simple rules cannot circulate productively without an 'accursed' – that is, sacralized or ritualized - share of particularly ostentatious squandering, destruction, and prestation. On this analysis potlatch earns its privilege within the general economy on a very natural, primitivist, and intuitive level: Northwest American potlatch is a handy example of a society which seems both wealthy and primitive, and which thus ritualizes its destructive expenditure as if by a natural and environmental clockwork. It is an ethnographic case study, drawn from the most ‘primitive,’ of how dépense can become a ritualized and particularly ostentatious rule.

But to see potlatch as a particularly pure and primitive dépense cuts against many of Mauss' insights and fortunately Bataille does not hold the conception of potlatch as a kind of primitively simple mechanical excretion for very long. In an early essay *The Notion of Expenditure [Dépense]* (1933/1997), which prefigured many arguments in *The Accursed Share*, Bataille lays out the cultural role of potlatch in a gift-giving economy: "The least advanced of these American tribes practice potlatch on the occasion of a person's change in situation...it can never be separated from a festival" (172). "Potlatch
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excludes all bargaining," he continues, "it is constituted by a considerable gift of riches, offered openly and with the goal of humiliating, defying, and obligating a rival [emphasis original]" (172). Potlatch has a celebratory meaning, and like all Maussian gifts, is a kind of obligation that goes beyond calculated bargaining; in this sense it can not be a purely functional or instrumental practice for its participants, and perhaps least of all a mechanistic function of the environment.

If Bataille's goal is to find an interesting ethnographic counter-example to the Western restricted economy of barter/exchange, potlatch seems as good an example as any other instance of gift-giving. But even in this early essay Bataille singles out potlatch from other modes of gift-giving as a special evidence of dépense, something which transgresses function and social usefulness. Yet potlatch obeys the logic of the gift, of obligation, cultural worth, and social purpose, of what Bataille admits is "the positive property of loss - from which spring nobility, honor and rank in a hierarchy" for potlatch societies (173).

If it serves these functions, then in what sense is it really a Bataillian expenditure, a truly annihilating and necessary waste of 'solar' energy? Bataille seems to believe, at least in *The Notion of Expenditure*, that potlatch is in fact a uniquely 'accursed' practice. That is, it is a practice concerned ultimately with rejection and waste rather than functional reappropriation; as such it is in some sense destined to trace a truly nihilistic logic of dépense: "As a game, potlatch is the opposite of a principle of conservation, it puts an end to the stability of fortunes as existed in the totemic economy" (174).
Its obligation is for endless escalation, not equilibrium, as evidenced by its unpredictable tendency to turn to wholesale destruction: It remains "at the mercy of a need for limitless loss, which exists endemically in a social group" (174).

And what of that group? Bataille’s curious use of the term “game” above implies that the potlatch is not just structured by the organization of a society but also something with a logic to its participants, although he believes it seems the height of the illogical to those readers participating in a ‘restricted economy’; as a practice the potlatch is thus something culturally apprehensible, and not just endemic in the social structure or necessitated by an economic or material base. And yet the practice remains, as he says, “at the mercy of a need” which remains “endemically in the social group.” Like Lévi-Strauss’ mythological incest taboo, this “need” has a general, which is to say natural, character. Yet it is also the product of a cultural choice, and few societies - if any, as we will see - choose rituals of material destruction that so well exemplify Bataille’s principle of loss.

Which societies? Here the ethnographic examples are telling, and they emerge properly developed in the first volume of *The Accursed Share*: blood-thirsty Aztecs and woeful, increasingly destructive Northwest American Indians. Bataille begins the account of potlatch in *The Accursed Share* with a lesson from the Aztecs; worshipping the sun and harvesting its bounty in excess, the Aztecs are an important reminder of the movement of the general economy, where "human sacrifices are only an extreme moment in the cycle of prodigalities" (63). The Aztec sacrifice is in fact a complex pyramid of obligations and gifts accumulating upward to the level of the chief. Standing in for the
whole of society, he finds himself with a drastic excess in human labor which is inevitably spent in human sacrifice to repay the gifts of the sun. Human sacrifice is a rather sensationalist ethnographic example to call upon, but it destabilizes rational and 'restricted economic' expectations for how a society might spend its surplus of harvest, labor, and other human resources. If Bataille takes the Aztec example as evidence of a general economy behind, or perhaps between, their long-exhausted society and ours, the question remains: What made the apparent 'need' for human sacrifice a social fact of Aztec society in particular and not a rather unfortunate outpouring of inevitable general economy dépense? Are the Aztec sacrifices truly pathological or do they, like a kind of human potlatch, obey some gift-giving logic of obligation? Is potlatch a Maussian gift and social fact, however contradictory to our modes of explanation, or does it destabilize those categories in favor of unknowable dépense and escalating destruction?

Here Bataille leaves things deliberately vague while moving quickly to the Indians of the Pacific Northwest. Among certain tribes "gift-giving is not the only form of potlatch": In addition to these total material prestations, the killing of humans and valuable animals or leveling of whole settlements is occasioned, "for it is necessary for them to startle, to stifle a rival group. The Indians of the north-west coast would set fire to their villages or break their canoes to pieces" to challenge their rivals (67), Bataille notes while citing The Gift.

These examples are indeed sensational and chosen for their confounding challenge to the restrictive economics of exchange and productive surplus; here are societies, it seems, with a clear surplus of resources who choose not to grow themselves
by productive appropriation of that surplus. As such they seem to present an alternative mode of consumption through expenditure that is coherent only under the scheme of a general economy; the organism that cannot grow with surplus must expend it at a loss.

The question we have been developing, of whether ethnographic potlatch can really serve Bataille as a dépense par excellence, seems at last lacking on the ethnographic evidence introduced here. An anthropologist, even one of Bataille’s contemporaries, would want to consider the social fact of these rituals only for the specific people in question. As historical moments in the life of gift-giving, they should have for anthropologists a relative logic not straightforwardly reducible to the general principle of dépense. And as particularly sensitive and isolated bits of ethnographic history, any specific ethnography would need to see them as open to dynamic histories and interpretations: if the potlatch is as escalatory and destruction-centered as Bataille claims, an ethnographer might expect potlatch practices not to remain as stable circuits that neatly expend their excess. Indeed one should expect potlatch practices to ebb and flow, to bring groups into unpredictable historical contact and conflict, to burn out and experience resurgences depending on dynamic historical contexts in the life of these groups.

In short, we might accuse Bataille of a kind of ethnographic naïveté in his appropriation of these instances as potlatch. In my view, however, Bataille does much to counter these objections with a reflexive understanding of the contradictions inherent in a theoretical appropriation of potlatch. Of the potlatch as gift, he explains that "if it is true that potlatch remains the opposite of rapine, of a profitable exchange or, generally
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speaking an appropriation of possessions, acquisition is nonetheless its ultimate purpose" (72). Like Mauss' gift, potlatch has not only a logic of obligation but also of acquisition - of the rank or honor and social recognition that animate any gift, even in its destruction. Then what of its escalating or destructive character, portrayed so drastically by Bataille?

"Because the movement it structures differs from ours, it appears stranger to us, and so it is more capable of revealing what usually escapes our perception, and what it shows us is our [the Western reader’s] basic ambiguity" (72).

The contradiction revealed is basic to economic life in *all* societies, according to Bataille: "[Potlatch or gifting] places the value, the prestige, and the truth of life in the negation of the servile use of possessions, but at the same time it makes a servile use of this negation" (206). In the terms of the gift, for example, gifts are lost to their owners in the acquisition of honor, but this generosity is put to work. In the case of potlatch, things are destroyed in the pursuit of prestige. Contradictorily, loss is put to a constructive end as people come to expect that a gift be repaid with interest or a rival become weak through a counter-potlatch. Its transgressive negativity, it seems, is conserved.

This is waste in the name of profit, or gain at the pursuit of loss. Living within a society in which the gift is a social fact, it is never possible to extricate the economic obligation of profit from the compulsion and ritual of loss. This is somewhat similar to the refrain of Mauss, who dwells on the unacknowledgable ambiguity of a gift that is "in theory voluntary and disinterested but in fact obligatory.”
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Perhaps contradicting some of his earlier statements, Bataille seems to conclude, in my view, that potlatch is no purer form of *dépense* than any other form of expenditure, acquisition, or trade. Potlatch reminds us of *dépense* only because its attribution in the ethnographic canon points to practices of gifting that *seem* so different from our own.

The concept of potlatch is thus, for Bataille, "the study of this strange yet familiar institution (a good many of our behaviors are reducible to the laws of potlatch; they have the same significance as it does)" (69). By “significance” Bataille may even mean the felt contradiction at the level of the individual. It thus has a "privileged place in general economy" (69) - not necessarily the general economy in some empirical and reified global system but his study of general economy as he seeks to problematize, if not explain, the contradictions of loss and destruction across societies.

To be certain, Bataille does believe in the primacy of *dépense* at the heart of each society's economic activity. Would it be fair, then, to say that every group is engaged in its own vigorous and contradictory denial of its accursed share, or the excessive element of production destined for waste? Is this true of the capitalist shopkeeper saving up credit as much as the native chief hoping to gain prestige over his rivals through potlatch?

For Bataille, perhaps, this question would be incoherent: Much like the total social fact of the gift, the immanent secret of the general economy defies the logic of empirical truth, conscious denial, and reasoned investigation. It is something to be glimpsed only in a relative gaze - in the ethnographica, in stories, legends, and philosophical thought – and perhaps in myth-telling as well. In *The Accursed Share* Bataille offers us the concept of potlatch because, perhaps, it seems shocking enough in
its difference to force us to consider the existence of dépense, if only momentarily. But before we accuse Bataille of shrouding the general economy in a general and unfalsifiable mysticism, we should remember that - however contradictorily - Bataille also, as claimed at the start of the chapter, is looking to build an inductive theory of the accursed share from cross-cultural evidence. We should remember too, the lessons of surrealist ethnography presented by Clifford; that "reality is never directly accessible, but exists only in the codes (always plural) which represent it" (553). What sort of codes, in the mind of the theorist, are needed to scramble, present, and represent the contradiction inherent in a cross-cultural and ethnographic accursed share?

*Bataille's understanding: a restricted economy?*

Michele Richman addresses Bataille's engagement with Mauss in a chapter of her book *Reading Georges Bataille* (1982). What links the two thinkers, besides Bataille's appropriation of the gift and of potlatch, is that both ultimately direct their arguments as cultural critiques of Western economic life. Richman tells us that "Mauss is the acknowledged precursor of the anthropological tradition that breaks with the deceptive neutrality of cultural relativism to base its critique of modern industrial nation states on examples drawn from non-Western societies" (Richman 22). This may seem a surprising characterization, but as Richman tells us Mauss addresses the concluding sections of *The Gift* to what he calls the debased state of gift-giving in Western societies. Bataille's argument, if not his orientation, is quite similar: "that which remains of traditional modes of dépense appears atrophied [in the restricted economy of Western capitalism], and the vital sumptuous tumult has been dissipated in the unleashing of class conflict" (22). In
each case the sensations of another, perhaps more primitive, society make our society by contrast seem the more strange, conflicted, and debased. *The Accursed Share*, as an argument, is essentially a critique of Western economism and utilitarian understandings of how 'wealth' - in all of its connotations - should be used. But, as Derrida might say, and Richman does not, there is an important neutralization of historicity going on in the orientation of these arguments. Their cultural critique is the product of a time and place which, as Derrida says of Lévi-Strauss, works ironically to deny or neutralize the importance of time, place, and of history in its own analyses. The total society fact does not easily submit to a dynamic or historical analysis; it is also somewhat mythic. In other words it is a kind of sui-generis truth which, in implicating all facets of society, does not seem to have a fixed historical development or origin. How can the total social fact of gift-giving, and above-all of potlatch, ever be said to change in time? A current historical study of the potlatch which introduces the question of historicity could make Bataille's critique of capitalism through potlatch somewhat ironic. Let us turn to one such study now.

In a work of historical anthropology, Joseph Masco surveys the development of the potlatch of the Northwest American Indians in its most sensational form, a form which has been "irresistible to the anthropological imagination" (1995:41). This is the wasteful destruction of native copper engravings. But as Masco argues, "The dramatic changes in [these American Indian] ritual forms during the second half of the nineteenth century can only be understood in light of the huge socio-cultural transformations that the colonial encounter initiated: most notably, the impact of capitalism and the catastrophic effects of disease" (42). The seemingly primitive and natural extravagance with which
Bataille turned our attention to the dépense of the general economy is, in fact, an historical product of that restricted economy of capitalism. It is the dynamic and imperialistic growth of the capitalist economy in history whose logic Bataille ironically calls restricted but which, Masco tells us, causes the sensational and unrestricted waste of the potlatch. The extravagance of potlatch then becomes a primitivist curiosity, moreover, for those early ethnographers who accompanied capitalism to the frontiers of the colonial world.

From the standpoint of Bataille's own intentions, his polemical orientation, and his presumed audience, this conclusion about the generality of potlatch takes on a second ironic meaning. Bataille concludes that "a good many of our laws" have "the same significance" as the potlatch (69); yet this should not be surprising if we consider that "potlatch" is an ethnographic concept with a proper cross-cultural significance only to the theorists who employ it. ‘The potlatch’ as a concept, as an ethnographic model, is also the product of "a good many of our laws" about how behavior economic or otherwise should be accounted for. Recall that for Mauss the contradictory nature of the gift is, in a way, only contradictory in the mind of the ethnographer who seeks to explain it. The gift seems at once religious, an affective outpouring of personal generosity, as well as economic, as it submits to social rules of obligation. This contradiction is a problem of theory, it exits only for the ethnologist who want to theorize gift-giving generally and submit it to analyses both economic and religious. To address this problem Mauss proposes the theory of the total social fact, that the gift carries non-reducible significance for both theorist and participant; one cannot analyze a gift-giving society without the holistic significance of the gift, or the gift without the whole of society.
Modes of theorizing, and the need to reductively analyze other societies in this or that way is another kind of social fact, if not a total one. These theories are the product of a time and place, and a culture. They, too, change with time. In a way, Mauss' theorizing of the total social fact is in some ways an historical predecessor to Lévi-Strauss' myth-making. It seeks to answer the theoretical divide, to use Derrida's formulation, between origins both natural and cultural; how can one theorize a concept which applies both generally and ahistorically, like a part of nature, and yet functions only within the norms of a specific society, a part of culture? Lévi-Strauss is quite aware of the place of his analysis as a social fact of his own academic culture; "It functions that this book on myths is itself a kind of myth," as he was quoted in the last section (Derrida 1978:287). So too, as we have just seen, in the case of Mauss' self-consciously theoretical proposition of the total social fact as a tool for theorizing social practices that carry a broad significance. For Bataille however, *The Accursed Share* is above-all a steadfast and determined effort to ignore or escape this inevitable realization. For a reader accustomed to a *textual* understanding of Georges Bataille, what is most striking about *The Accursed Share* is Bataille's steadfast denial of the nature of his own text. He will not admit to the mythic status of his argument, employing the most transgressive and phantom of concepts but presenting them as seriously and empirically as in a restrictedly economic textbook. Bataille will not admit that his text is primarily a cultural critique and instead presents his General Economy as a kind of natural fact.

For Bataille there is only one general economy which acts, almost literally, as a force of nature. And there is only *one* restricted economy, which he analyses as essentially the *social* product of Westerners. He does not extend this analysis or critique
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beyond the notion of a single restricted Western economy. The Northwest Indians or Aztecs do not have restricted economies of their own.

The primitive societies said to practice potlatch are thus used by Bataille as a concept to fill the theoretical space between the restricted and the general, the cultural and the natural. How so? The restricted economy, that is Western capitalist economy, is a properly cultural phenomenon for Bataille. If the restricted economy of the West seems to thwart the truths of the general economy, it is on the strength of culture; Western economics becomes adept at rechanneling, ignoring, or hiding what is *dépense*, what are its unusable excesses; this is a kind of cultural and interpretive achievement on the part of capitalists. Bataille's primitive societies, however, almost seem to lack a culture of their own which could neutralize the truth of *dépense* and the general economy and counter it with a cultural or restricted logic of their own. But neither are Bataille's potlatch societies powerless natural expressions of the general economy. Potlatch is, as Bataille has admitted, not a more natural or truer expression of *dépense* after all; it has, however, a sensational and felt ambivalence about it - destroying senselessly but also for the utility of gaining prestige. Each primitive nod Bataille makes to *dépense* is telling; the solar religion of the Aztecs, who harvest the sun's bounty in excess and reap it again in the form of their sacrificial victims, making a sacrificial gift of them in their sun-worship. They are almost an expression of a truly natural, as opposed to cultural, order. Almost. More complex are the potlatch practices of the Northwest American Indians; they cast their material wealth back into the sea, but only while looking back ambivalently at cultural rivals, laying down a contradictory challenge for them to do the same.
It is a sensational ambivalence the capitalist economizer does not seem to suffer from. Against this Bataille offers the Western reader his *Accursed Share*. This is Bataille's theoretical primitivism, where the primitive are placed at a fundamentally ambivalent crossroads of the general and restricted, natural and cultural. Primitive instances of potlatch are supposed to shock the reader into considering the possibility of *dépense*. 'The primitive' in the Accursed Share are, by definition, those whose economic behavior sensationalizes us with its ambivalence. And yet this sensationalism seems entirely a product of Bataille's primitivism. On the other hand the need to see this behavior as ambivalent - as behavior which frustrates, submits, or evades a functional-economic or utilitarian explanation - might well belong to the logic of Bataille's restricted economy. Bataille employs notions of the primitive to question the restricted economy; yet if a Western restricted economy exists as Bataille characterizes it, then 'the primitive' is likely not much more than a phantom of a restricted economic imagination. And quite literally, as Masco tells us, of its colonial history. When we consider the dynamic and historic nature of the phenomena Bataille calls restricted, this becomes doubly ironic; as Masco tells us, the spread of capitalism in fact precipitated a crisis-behavior which Bataille appropriates as the primitive.

The argument of *The Accursed Share*, as a polemic, is essentially critique of Western economism and utilitarian understandings of how 'wealth' - in all of its connotations - should be used. Like the contributors to *Documents* decades before, primitivism is put into the service of cultural critique; it is not that 'the primitive' is a more authentic or human alternative to Western corruption, for either *Documents* or Bataille's *Accursed Share*. But for the contributors to *Documents*, Clifford tells us that
"the ethnographic surrealist, unlike the typical art critic or anthropologist of the period, delights in cultural impurities" (1981:549). Contemporary readers of Bataille have often wanted to retain something of his surrealist background, of a destabilizing and transgressively impure mixing in de Sade, in his notions of the sacred and profane, the natural and cultural. But to the extent that Bataille gives an economic form to these concerns in The Accursed Share, and opposes the restricted to the primitive, an open acknowledgement of the surreal, the ironic, and the impure is more than denied; like Derrida's "time and history" in a certain anthropology, this possibility is effectively neutralized.
Conclusion: subjectivity and personal meaning in Bataille’s economy

A philosophy for myth-making

That an anthropologist can be attracted to what seems shocking and transgressive in other societies while remaining a critic or even a moralist at home is no surprise to Lévi-Strauss. In his work *Tristes Tropiques* (1955/1974) Lévi-Strauss reconciles this contradiction with the insight that the anthropologist can have an ethical orientation to *all* culture, but only if he or she takes the widest possible view:

“We then discover that no society is fundamentally good, but that none is absolutely bad; they all offer their members certain advantages, with the proviso that there is invariably a residue of evil, the amount of which seems to remain more or less constant and perhaps corresponds to a specific inertia in social life resistant to all attempts at organization” (Lévi-Strauss 1955/1974:387)

Perhaps Bataille’s generalizing argument was to draw out this ‘accursed share,’ to foreground it, and to counteract its “inertia” by put it into motion within the language of his economy. If *The Accursed Share* becomes for Bataille “a reversal of thinking – and of ethics” (25) it is because Bataille begins with his own interest in evil, transgression, and heedless expenditure and reconstitutes that personal residue as primitive and natural facts.

That Bataille wants to criticize to the Western ethic of capitalism makes his writing a singularly twisted companion to the works of anthropologists like Marcel Mauss. At the end of *The Gift* Mauss tells us “that concrete study leads not only to a science of manners, a partial social science, but even to ethical considerations” (81). An ethical rebuke can be given to Western economizing, but only if the natives too are seen to have “manners” worthy of ethical consideration. I think this is what Mauss means by a “partial social science,” and as Lévi-Strauss says of the ethical orientation of all
anthropologists, this analysis cannot escape the question of the personal meaning these “manners” have for their participants. Because the total social fact of gift-giving is felt as much by its participants as it is seen by the anthropologist, Mauss calls the personal significance of the gift “hau,” a compelled but nevertheless strongly-felt sense of generosity. Even anthropologists contemporary to Mauss who studied economic exchange in particular societies were no less compelled to resort to these magical terms to express the significance that economies can have for their participants. In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1932), Bronislaw Malinowski details the seemingly arbitrary circuits in the exchange of useless shells among Pacific Islanders in order to critique Western economic ideas about use-value and proper economic behavior. Ultimately, however, Malinowski is seduced by what he calls the “mana” these exchanges have in constituting meaningful relationships among their participants; he admits that these circuits have a logical and perhaps even ‘restricted’ economy of their own.

For all of Derrida’s interest in the arbitrary structural relation of signs in language and myth, it should be added that Derrida is also concerned with the meaningful context of these signs in speech. Perhaps a simpler way to capture Derrida’s concern with Bataille’s transgressive textuality is to say that the transgressive qualities of Bataille’s text are found only in its reading, in ways in which the act of reading transgresses the expectations of an audience. If *The Accursed Share* attempts to employ concepts like *dépense* and a ‘general economy’ so transgressively, this is because Bataille is not as concerned with the personal meaning these concepts might have for any supposed participants; Instead he uses these concepts for what transgressive, primitive, or ‘accursed’ shares they might evoke for the reader. Contemporary Bataille scholars would
most likely insist that the only real participants in Bataille’s strange economy are those
who read his works. In this sense, Bataille’s writings are mythic in the most literal sense;
they are stories Bataille tells to his own people which give us a sense of what is
ultimately meaningful for him. Like all myths, one can analyze these stories in several
ways; one can attempt a kind of philosophical exegesis of them within the text, as does
Derrida; or, one can read them in a cultural context, as does Clifford. As far as Bataille’s
philosophical anthropology is concerned, both of these interpretations will always be
simultaneous possibilities.
References


